THE BETROTHED

(*I Promessi Sposi*)

A MILANESE STORY
OF THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

BY
ALESSANDRO MANZONI

Translated by
DANIEL J. CONNOR

WITH

THE COLUMN OF INFAMY

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TO THE MEMORY
OF THE
RIGHT REV. EUGENE AUGUSTINE GARVEY
A SINCERE ADMIRER OF MANZONI
AND
A CHURCHMAN WHOM MANZONI WOULD HAVE ADMIRED
THIS VERSION OF
HIS FAVORITE HISTORICAL ROMANCE
IS AFFECTIONATELY INSCRIBED

The Translator

PREFACE

It is difficult for the reader of today, who sees Papini's "Life of Christ" occupying the place of best seller on American bookstalls, to realize that, a century ago, Italian prose was the pariah of Europe. Political and social disintegration, by depriving Italy's representative citizens of the natural opportunities for vigorous interchange of thought, had also enervated the written language and separated it by a wide chasm from the spoken language on which it depends for its energy and expressiveness. Jeffrey's verdict, pronounced in 1810,[1] that "almost all Italian prose is feeble and deficient in expression," is recognized on both sides of the Alps as nothing more than an adequate expression of the actual state of affairs. Just as far beyond controversy is it that the immense change which the intervening century has witnessed was brought about by Manzoni, and specifically by his masterpiece "I Promessi Sposi," or "The Betrothed." "The Italian book," candidly admits d'Ovidio, "had become almost unknown to the intellectual commerce of Europe, and Manzoni brought it back in triumph and gave it a place—and such a place!—in what we call world-literature by his immortal work, the most interesting after the 'Divina Commedia' and 'Orlando Furioso,' the loftiest after the 'Commedia,' the most printed book in Italy and the most translated into the various tongues of Europe."[2]

Alessandro Manzoni, though the head of the Romantic school in Italy, led one of the most unromantic of lives. All of his eighty-eight years, except the few that intervened between college and his marriage at twenty-three, were spent in an almost monastic retirement. His life presents very few sentimental vicissitudes and those closely guarded, no professional vicissi-

[1] Life and Writings of Victor Alfieri, Edinburgh Review, January, 1810.
[2] d'Ovidio, Nuovi Studi Manzoniani, Hoepli, Milan, 1908, p. 6.

tudes, no political vicissitudes, and only unimportant financial vicissitudes. Added to this dearth of materials the biographer finds another difficulty in his subject's unconquerable reticence and modesty. Even in correspondence with his closest friends he shrank from those more personal touches by which other men betray their likes and dislikes, their joys and sorrows, as from a display of egotism. He was a prey to the tortures of neurasthenia from youth up, and still he confines his references to his sufferings to occasions when it became necessary to excuse his tardiness. It is hardly matter for surprise, therefore, that no extensive biography of him has yet been written.

Manzoni was born in Milan on March 7, 1785, of Don Pietro Manzoni, a noble landowner of Valsassina, and Giulia Becaria, daughter of the celebrated penologist, who had revolutionized the ancient prison system almost single-handed. The union was a singularly unhappy one, and it was, very likely, to remove Lissandrino from an unpleasant domestic atmosphere that he was sent to boarding-school at Merate at the age of six. Though of a nature demanding more than the ordinary child's share of affection and sympathy, he passed the next ten years in three successive institutions. That he was left temporarily with a strain of cynicism is not surprising. The wonder is, rather, that he escaped the penalty of lifelong misanthropy that so often follows in the wake of an experience like this in childhood.

A few years after leaving college he accompanied his mother, who in the meantime had been legally separated from her husband and contracted an irregular union with Count Carlo Imbonati, to Paris. This was in 1805. To the era of the Encyclopedists had succeeded that of the Ideologists, who carried on the Voltairean traditions and furnished France with thinkers like Cabanis, Constant, deTracy and Fauriel, and brilliant salons like those of Madame Condorcet and Madame Cabanis. Manzoni was a frequenter of both, but especially of the former, where he laid the foundations of his historic friendship with Fauriel, who was to become his poetic monitor, critic and translator. The effects of his environment can be most succinctly conveyed by a short quotation from a letter written in 1806 in reply to the

announcement of a friend's death. "You cannot believe how afflicted I was at the news of poor Arese's grave illness. I am bitterly grieved that his friends did not have access to him, but that, instead, he had to be confronted with the horrible apparition of a priest."[3]

He returned to the Catholic faith in consequence of his wife's conversion from Calvinism during their residence in Paris in 1810. From that time on religion not only moulded his character and conduct, but dominated his thought and imagination, and even determined his mature poetic criterions. "Manzoni the poet and critic acquired his characteristic traits only after his conversion, and much more under this influence than under that of contemporary literary currents."[4] "It is a fact," he writes in 1828, "that the evident truth of Catholicity pervades and dominates my mind. I see it at the beginning and end of every moral question. I note its influence where it is recognized and invoked as well as where it is ignored. Even such truths as are discovered without its guidance seem to me incomplete and insecure until they are included in its teaching and they appear as the consequences of its doctrine—which they are."[5] What gave a distinctive character to Manzoni's religion is that it proved to be no uncongenial element for the ironical laughter he inherited from his unregenerate years. He was the perfect synthesis of Voltaire and St. Thomas Aquinas, or, as Carlo Cattaneo observes, he harmonized two qualities that generally exclude each other—piety and satire.

Manzoni's period of serious poetic activity began two years later, in 1812. His "Hymn on the Resurrection" was the first of a series of sacred and profane lyrics culminating in his "Ode on the Death of Napoleon" in 1821, whose new accent penetrated as far as Weimar and certified to Goethe the birth of a genius whom he acclaimed from the first. In later life Manzoni came to the conclusion that his poetic vocation had not been real—

[3] Carteggio di Alessandro Manzoni, Hoepli, Milan, 1912, vol. I, p. 59.

[4] A. Momigliano, Vita di Alessandro Manzoni, Principato, Messina, 1915, p. 34.

[5] Carteggio, vol. II, p. 387.

that "the muse had not come in search of him, but that he had only been winding himself in pursuing her."[6] This much is true, that his predetermined standards were very definite, so that, in lyric and dramatic poetry as well as in the case of historical romance, his productions can be considered as perfect paradigms of the principles he espoused. In lyric poetry his aim was naturalness and sincerity. He thus broke decisively with the excessive formalism of the preceding epoch. "By perusing the poetry of more than two centuries," he notes, "one sees it dominated by a preponderating esteem of poetry itself and a contempt of almost everything else, except only living potentates. Addressing the Fates, raising indestructible monuments, defying the all-corroding tooth of Time, joking about death—these are its ordinary themes."[7]

The banishment of pagan mythology from modern poetry was only one of the reforms undertaken by the Italian Romanticists. The opposition they encountered from the Classicists on this point was but a little less strenuous than on the subject of the dramatic unities. Manzoni not only wrote the palmary indictment of this tyrannical tradition in his "Letter to Chauvet," but he composed, besides, two dramas, "Il Conte di Carmagnola" in 1820 and "Adelchi" in 1822, in which he set the unities of time and place aside definitely, and introduced, at the same time, several choruses in a distinctly lyric form. Though abounding in dramatic situations, these pieces were composed only for reading, and it was against his advice that they were produced in 1828. They have not occupied the stage themselves, but they have the merit of having blazed the way for other playwrights and of having emancipated them from the necessity of "making their characters speak as men do not and could not speak in ordinary life, of eschewing both poetry and prose and substituting for them a chill rhetoric most unsuited to producing a sympathetic response."[8] In this sense he can be considered the father of the modern school of Italian dramatists.

[6] G. Sforza, Epistolario di A. Manzoni, Carrara, Milan, vol. II, p. 283.
[7] Opere Inedite e Rare, vol. III, p. 168.
[8] Carteggio, vol. I, p. 365.

While still engaged on the revision of "Adelchi," in 1821, Manzoni was contemplating what he considered a still better means of illustrating his conviction that history supplies one of the richest sources of inspiration to the literary artist. He sketches his idea of what the historical novel should be to Fauriel in a letter of November 3, 1821. "I conceive it to be the representation of a given state of society by means of events and characters so closely resembling the reality that one might take it for some authentic history that had just been discovered. When historical facts and personages are brought in, I think they should be represented in the most strictly historical way. Thus Richard Cœur-de-Lion, for example, to me appears defective in Ivanhoe."[9] By May, 1822, he had his canvas pretty well filled in. These are the elements with which he is to deal: "The most arbitrary kind of government, combined with feudal and popular anarchy; legislation that astonishes us by its prescriptions as well as by what it presupposes or recites; an ignorance that is profound, ferocious and arrogant; some anecdotes that are little known, but contained in documents deserving of trust, and that furnish full opportunity for developing these details; finally, a plague that gives exercise to the most consummate and shameless depravity, the most absurd prejudices and the most touching virtues."[10]

One of the technical canons which he formulates in 1822 surprises us by its modernity. "As for the march of events and the intrigue, I think that the best way of avoiding what others have done is to set one's self to studying how men act in reality, and to study the points where this contradicts the spirit of romance. In all the romances I have read I seem to detect great efforts to establish interesting and unexpected relations among the different characters in order to bring them on the stage in company, to invent episodes that affect simultaneously and in manifold directions the destiny of all—in a word, an artificial unity that we do not see in real life. I know that it passes for a merit in certain works which possess merits of a real and high

[9] Carteggio, vol. I, p. 541.
[10] Id., vol. II, p. 26.

order; but I am convinced that some day it will be an object of criticism."[11]

"I Promessi Sposi" came out finally in June, 1827. Its success was immediate. "It is one of the four or five books that have given me the most rapturous reading of my life," wrote Lamartine.[12] "Walter Scott is great," commented Chateaubriand, "but Manzoni is something more."[13] Goethe was reading it a month after it was off the press. "Manzoni's novel," Eckermann reports him as saying, "soars far above all that we know of the kind. I need say to you nothing more than that the interior life—all that comes from the soul of the poet—is absolutely perfect; and that the outward—the delineation of localities and the like—is in no way inferior."[14] During his last Italian tour Lord Macaulay, according to his usual plan of reading the literature of the countries through which he was passing, devoured Manzoni's three volumes with characteristic avidity. "I have finished Manzoni's novel, not without many tears," he writes in his diary. "The scene between the Archbishop and Don Abbondio is one of the noblest I know. The parting scene between the lovers and Father Cristoforo is most touching. If the Church of Rome really were what Manzoni represents her to be, I should be tempted to follow Newman's example."[15]

It was Giordani, writing in September, 1827, who pointed out the appeal that was destined to make the new production immortal, however. "As a literary work, there might be some controversy, according to the variety of tastes and habits of thought. But, as a book of the people, a catechism dramatized, it seems to me stupendous—divine."[16] It is the people who have, in fact, proved by a century of ever-increasing admiration for this tale of a peasant lad and lass that it has the qualities which elevate it above the plane of transient literature, no matter

[11] Id., vol. II, pp. 27–28.

[12] Carteggio, vol. II, p. 352.

[13] L. Beltrami, Alessandro Manzoni, Hoepli, Milan, 1898, p. 95.

[14] Goethe's Conversations, George Bell and Sons, London, 1906, p. 270.

[15] Trevelyan, Life and Letters of Lord Macaulay, Lovell, New York, vol. II, p. 265.

[16] Sforza, Epistolario di A. Manzoni, Carrara, Milan, vol. I, p. 374.

how excellent, to the category of the permanent and classical. "It is not enough that the intellectual moment of a long period be presented; enduring literature must do much more than that. It must depict the personality of the people, which the people themselves recognize as the ideal personality of an epoch."[17]

It seems strange that a hermit like Manzoni should have been the standard-bearer of a revolution; but so it was. Carducci would exclude him from the band of patriots who brought about their country's independence of Austria. But, though he did not bear a sword nor, like Berchet, sound the immediate call to arms, he did something more essential to ultimate victory in keeping alive, after the discouragements of 1814 and 1821, the spirit of determination. A period of literary renascence has more than once in history accompanied or preceded a political revolution. So it did in Italy. It was, in reality, patriotism that furnished the driving force behind the Romanticist movement and the short career of the "Conciliatore," which was the official organ of the movement. Banished from political life, Italians of the early nineteenth century took refuge in literature, thereby initiating that long and painful struggle against foreign domination which at last unified the nation. "In combating the old standards of Classicism in the interests of Romanticism," Mazzini confessed in his later life, "we were fighting, in the only way open to us, in the cause of the revolution."[18]

Some censured Austria openly, and were beheaded or thrown to rot in the Spielburg prison. Manzoni's satire was so subtle and deadly that the enemy were as helpless in counteracting its effects as if it had been some poisonous gas of modern warfare. "For us Lombardesi," writes Sailer, "that apparatus of historical sketches on Spain's government of the Duchy of Milan was a skilful expedient for smuggling under the eyes of the masters a travesty on Austrian officialdom. Berchet, Guerazzi and Mazzini worked powerfully on the young. Manzoni, without seeming to have aught to do with it, demolished foreign domination in the minds of a multitude to whom the writings of these

[17] Georg Brandes, in Moritzen's "Georg Brandes in Life and Letters."
[18] d'Ovidio, Nuovi Studi Manzoniani, p. 320.

outlaws were inaccessible and prepared it to endorse the political movement when it came along."[19]

Not that "I Promessi Sposi" belongs to the literature of propaganda. It simply develops moral and psychological principles that are eternal. The occasion which calls forth such masterpieces may pass, but their applicability remains unimpaired by new political and intellectual environments. "Manzoni's art is the reflection of the highest ideals that the human conscience entertains or should entertain. Religion is its inspiration, because that, too, is rooted in the human conscience. His art, like all true art, is instinct with the real, substantial, perennial life of man himself, not a life that is artificial, capricious, arbitrary, changeable. He sought to create an Italian unity in the language of literature before this unity appeared, as he had wished and foretold that it would appear, in the realm of history and politics. And he sought to create it because only in this way could art, which, according to him, should be the voice and ally of the human conscience, find easy access to the national conscience. A hundred years may have passed by, but the man still lives. He lives, and remains essentially the most educative writer of Italy."[20]

DANIEL J. CONNOR.

November 4, 1923.

[19] d'Ovidio, Discussioni Manzoniane, Lapi, Città di Castello, 1886, pp. 139–140.

[20] Ruggero Bonghi, Horae Subcesivæ, p. 388.

CRITICAL REMARKS

ON

MANZONI'S BETROTHED:

BY

THE COUNT O'MAHONY.*

To publish a novel, to analyse, to eulogise it, and recommend its perusal to the good and pious, will appear no doubt very extraordinary, and offend the prejudices of many who have agreed among themselves to consider a novel, whoever may be its author, and whatever may be its subject, form, and design, as a pestilent production. If you ask them why? "Because," they will reply — "because it is a novel!" The answer is as wise as it is peremptory and decisive, and we will spare ourselves the useless trouble of replying to arguments so profound and powerful. We will, however, submit a few serious reflections to minds of a less elevated order, were it only to prove that we can talk reasonably, even on the subject of novels.

Certainly, if we are understood to designate by the appellation of *Novel*, the written dreams and extravagant imaginations of a corrupt mind and depraved heart, where illusions are substituted for realities, vice transformed into virtue, crime justified by the passions that lead to its perpetration, and fallacious pictures presented of an ideal

* Translated from the Italian.

world, or criminal apologies for a world too real; if, we say, such are the novels to be condemned and proscribed, none more than ourselves will be disposed to confirm the sentence. The unhappy influence which productions like these have exerted over the minds of youth, and above all, the ravages which their multiplication has within a few years produced, is a fact acknowledged by all, by those who have escaped the contagion of their perusal, as well as by those whom that perusal has injured. With respect to this, the wise and the good are unanimous in their testimony and their anathemas; it is one of those self-evident truths, about which an Englishman or a German might still elaborate many a learned dissertation, but of which we shall take no further notice, certain that we should only repeat much less forcibly and eloquently, that which a thousand writers or orators have said before us.

But there is another point of view under which we must consider novels, or rather the works so called, but which bear, to those which morals and good taste reprobate, no other resemblance than the name. These are, it is true, unhappily few in number, and therefore have not been classed by themselves, but have been comprehended in the common appellation, and included in the general proscription; like an honest man, who, bearing the same name as a rogue, partakes with him the odium of his reputation. But this is an injustice for which we are disposed to claim reparation.

Every work of imagination, in which the author causes ideal personages to speak, think, and act, according to his pleasure, has been stigmatised as a *Novel*. But, if we allow this rigorous definition, the apologue, so dear to the moralist, is a *Novel*, and deserving of proscription. We will go further; the parable, which also creates its characters and invents their words and actions, is a *novel!* But who would dare to call them so? Who would dare profane by this name, those profound allegories, those holy fables, so excellent in truth, and so replete with instruction, which God himself has related to man? Finally, if we peruse the works of the most austere philosophers, and the most severe moralists, without excepting ecclesiastical

writers, we shall find among them all, pictures of fancy or ideal histories of imaginary persons, fiction serving as a veil, or rather (we must acknowledge it) as an apology for truth.

Now, we ask, by what unjust caprice would we condemn in the novelist that which we admire and applaud in the moralist and philosopher; or rather, by what title do we interdict to the former the right of being equally philosophical and moral with the latter? If man were without weaknesses and society without imperfections, truth would prevail of itself, and in order to be loved and obeyed, it would need only to be shown in its unadorned purity and undisguised nakedness. But, from the beginning of the world, pride has precipitated man into darkness. Corrupt and blind, a jealous susceptibility is developed in his character, which continually increases in proportion to his blindness and corruptions, — that is to say, the deeper he is plunged in darkness, the more he dreads the light, and it is but by degrees, and under various disguises, that we can hope ultimately to make him endure its full blaze.

Besides, fiction, under divers forms, such as fables, apologues, novels, allegories, and tales, constitutes a large portion of the literature of every nation; to this we may add the utility, nay, even the necessity of disguising truth, in order to make it acceptable to our imperfection; and more than all, the good frequently resulting from these modest productions ought to stimulate those on whom Heaven has bestowed the same kind of talent, to employ it in exposing vice and reforming the corruptions of society.

But if the imperfection and weakness of our hearts render fiction necessary to us, a similar necessity results from the languor and inaction of our minds: for in proportion to the extent of public corruption, individual application of the mind to severe and serious study diminishes. Insensibly all continued exercise of the powers of his understanding becomes irksome to man, and he finally considers thought and *ennui* to be synonymous terms. This is, without doubt, a deplorable and alarming symptom of the decline of society; but we are obliged to confess its existence, and, not possessing the power of changing, we must submit to its caprices and satisfy its necessities.

Now, whether from instinct or observation, writers appear for some years past to have generally understood the demands of the age; and throughout Europe, men of distinguished talents have employed themselves in answering them. It might be said that Germany, England, Switzerland, and Italy, have formed as it were a literary alliance, which will probably endure longer than their *political alliance.* As to France, her attention has for fifteen years been attracted to literature as well as to politics; but she has thought it sufficient for her glory to translate foreign books, and for her prosperity to translate foreign constitutions.*

However this may be, the new taste for foreign literature is remarkable. Numerous works of imagination have appeared simultaneously of an elevated style and uncommon erudition. The choice, and we may add the gravity, of the subjects, the importance of the action, the extent of the developements, and the fidelity of the descriptions, stamp them with a peculiar character, and oblige us to assign to their authors a distinct rank among novel writers. Although unequal in merit, they may be arranged into two classes. The one, beholding how history was neglected, has endeavoured to restore its influence by reviving our ancient chronicles, and presenting to us in an elegant undress, the same characters from whom we avert our eyes, in the magnificent and stiff accompaniments of their historical costume. The other, less numerous, but, in our opinion, much more happily inspired, afflicted by the cold indifference with which the most excellent works o morals and politics are received, or by the insulting contempt which discards them altogether, has undertaken to allure and amuse the prejudices of the age, in order to correct them. In an imaginary picture, they have specially devoted themselves to describe the great springs of human

* In this assertion we do not agree with the critic. France, in common with other European nations, has unquestionably manifested much curiosity regarding foreign literature, and has availed herself of its treasures; but, by the original works of her own writers, the advantage has been reciprocated, particularly in the novels lately produced in Paris by such men as M. de Vigny and M. Victor Hugo. The "Notre Dame de Paris" of the latter has attained an European celebrity, and has accordingly been incorporated in the present series of "Standard Novels." — *English Ed.*

action, and to bring prominently forward those traits of character, those inflexible criticisms on society, which under such a form will attract attention, when every direct and serious admonition would be rejected. Now, it is to this class of novel writers that Alessandro Manzoni essentially belongs.

And here, a great difficulty presents itself; a work of which the action is so simple, that an analysis of it might be given in half a page, and yet so rich in beauties, that a volume might be written in its praise; between these two extremes, the middle path is not easy to find. For, if we should content ourselves with stating that two villagers, who were betrothed, and about to be united, had been separated by the menaces of a rich and titled robber, calumniated, betrayed by a seeming friend, and aided by the unlooked-for benevolence of an enemy; again persecuted by the tyranny of the great, and then almost immolated by the tyranny of the people, and finally delivered by the pestilence itself; if, we repeat, we confine ourselves to this exposition, we shall have presented to our readers the abstract of the work; but shall we have given them a single idea of its beauties?

If, on the contrary, we would enter on an examination of the characters, and follow them in their developement, what a task we impose on ourselves! For here, what beauty! what truth! what originality! The character of Don Abbondio alone would furnish matter for extensive remark, as it is assuredly one of the most profoundly comic creations of the genius of romance. A coward by nature, and selfish from habit, entering the ecclesiastical order only to find in it powerful protection against future enemies, and a refuge against present terrors, during his whole life he pursues, without a single deviation, the tyrannical vocation of *fear*. Ever disturbed by the apprehension of being disturbed, and giving himself prodigious trouble in order to secure his tranquillity, the care of his repose takes from him all repose. "*A friend to all,*" is his device, and "*Be quiet,*" his habitual reply. For him, the evil committed in secret is preferable to the good which might excite dangerous remark. However, at the bottom of his

heart, he still esteems the good and virtuous; as to the wicked, he caresses, and where there is necessity, flatters them; in every controversy, he deems the strongest party to be in the right, but his fear of mistake often prevents him from deciding which *is* the strongest. In discussions where he is personally involved, he acts not less prudently; he does not grant concessions, he does more, he freely offers them, as by so doing he saves the honour of his authority. Indeed, he does not drop a word nor risk a gesture, of which he has not previously weighed the consequences. So that by calculation and foresight, he is prepared for all, except the performance of duty under circumstances of peril and difficulty; to this he closes his ears and his eyes, and thus compromises with the world and his conscience.

And here, let us add, that if any of our readers discover, in this character, the intention, or even the possibility, of an application injurious to religion, they understand but little the mind of the author, which is constantly animated by the most ardent faith, and imbued, we may say, with its highest inspirations. The curate Abbondio appears before us chiefly to give greater relief to the sublime figures of the friar Christopher, and the holy archbishop of Milan, and to furnish materials for scenes between these three characters, where the weakness, the cowardice, and the selfishness of the one serves to brighten, by contrast, the courage, devotion, and heroism of the others. It is an eminently philosophical conception to portray three men entering the priesthood from such different motives, in the course of their long lives, disclosing faithfully in their actions, the sources of their primitive choice. A lesson indeed! from which we may learn what religion can do with men, when they obey its laws and devote themselves to its service, and what men can do with religion, when they subject it to their caprices, or prostitute it to their interests.

But it is in the conversion of the formidable Unknown, that religion appears in all its power, and its pontiff in all the majesty of his benevolence. The interview between these two persons, the one the terror, the other the beloved of his country; the proud criminal humbling himself

before the most humble of the just; the former preserving in his profound humiliation the traces of his habitual wickedness and pride, and the latter, with humility equally profound, the majestic authority of unsullied virtue. This scene, conceived and executed with equal genius, combines within itself the deepest interest, and the highest beauty.

As an illustration of the ingenuity and discernment of the author, we will offer one remark further; he has placed before us two wicked men; the one a subaltern robber, a libertine of the second rank, a swaggerer in debauch, vainer of his vices than jealous of his pleasures. The other a superior genius, who has measured how far man could descend in crime, and himself reached its depths, where he governs human corruption as its sovereign, committing no act of violence without leaving the impression of his unlimited power and inexorable will. One of these is to be converted; which will it be? The least guilty? No; coward in vice, where would he find courage to repent? He will die hardened and impenitent. It is the grand criminal who will be drawn from the abyss, for he has descended into it with all his power, and it will need a repentance proportioned to the measure of his iniquities to restore him to the favour of his God. There is evinced in this developement, great knowledge of the human heart, and a very striking revelation of the mysterious dealings of a just and compassionate God.

We find the same sagacity of observation in other parts of the work; it appears under an altogether original form in the episode of Gertrude; irresistibly conducted to the cloister, notwithstanding her insurmountable repugnance, when she could by a single word free herself from such a condemnation, dooming her own self to a sacrifice she detests; yielding without having been conquered; the slave of her very liberty, and the victim to a voluntary fatality! It is not in a rapid sketch that we can give an idea of this singular and altogether novel character. To appreciate its excellence, we must give an attentive perusal.

But Alessandro Manzoni is not only a skilful painter of individual portraits, he excels also in grand historical representations. In that of the plague at Milan, and the

famine preceding it, his manner becomes bolder, his touch more free and majestic, without, however, losing any of its exquisite delicacy. When he represents an entire people rebelling against hunger, or vanquished by disease and death, we deeply feel the horror of the picture, at the same time that an occasional smile is elicited by the comic genius of the artist, which exercises itself even amidst the agonies of famine and pestilence, so that, through the grand design of the exhibition, the delicate touches of the pencil are still visible, and individual character perceptible through the very depths of bold and general description; it is Van Dyck painting on the reverse of one of Michael Angelo's pictures.

We will not take leave of this interesting production without indulging ourselves in one more observation, which is, that in this succession of adventures, where appear, by turns or simultaneously, two robber chiefs and their followers, an unbridled soldiery, a people in rebellion, famine, and pestilence, all the evil specially resulting to the virtuous, is the consequence of the cowardice of a single man! What a lesson may we derive from such a *Novel!*

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MANZONI'S "BETROTHED"

ALEXANDER MANZONI, who is best remembered by his novel, "I Promessi Sposi," but who did other things worthy of remembrance, was born in Milan in 1785, and died in 1873. His life was long and full. He was fortunate in his parents. His father—Count through a privilege which Alexander refused to claim—married a daughter of that Beccaria who was one of the first Continental writers to consider the question of crime and punishment from a humane and philosophical point of view. Alexander thought much in his youth, and came, like Dante, to hold that the tyrant deserved the same punishment as the murderer; but, unlike the most radical of his compatriots, he saw no reason why he should mete out the punishment. He believed in law and order; though the ultra-conservatives distrusted him, he had no sympathy with the principles of the French Revolution or with the revolt that had in it the germ of anarchy. In 1808 he married Mlle. Louise Henriette Blondel, a gentle Swiss blonde, to whom he never ceased to be intensely devoted. His life was uneventful. His friends might have said of him as others once said of Longfellow, "Any change would be for the worse." He was essentially a man of letters, and he loved, after the manner of Horace, a quiet country life; he saw that much more might be done for Italy than the exercise of futile physical force; good ethics, nobility of purpose, needed to be taught; the vital quality of a religion which was sinking to mere deism or perfunctory ceremonial needed to be proclaimed

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without violence. By his words and his example, Manzoni appealed to the best qualities of the Italian head and heart. In comparison with Silvio Pellico and the more aggressive patriots, Manzoni seemed indifferent in political matters. The only reproach made against him was that he was not persecuted. It is true that even the Austrian Government would have honoured him, had he consented. "I do not understand," Mr. Howells says in his "Modern Italian Poets," "how any one can read the romance and the dramas of Manzoni without finding him full of sympathy for all Italy has suffered, and a patriot very far from resigned. Under such governments as endured in Piedmont until 1848, in Lombardy until 1859, in Venetia until 1866, literature must remain educative, or must cease to be." The facts of his life are his works. There is little to be said of him beyond what he has put into his dramas, his poems, and his one great romance.

The position of Alexander Manzoni's historical novel, "I Promessi Sposi" ("The Betrothed"), as an Italian classic, never has been seriously questioned, even by those critics among his countrymen who held that the influences that produced it were foreign. It is evident that Manzoni, in his romantic dramas, was stimulated by the example of Goethe and Schiller as he was directed in the methods of his great historical novel by Scott. It is evident, too, that while the motive of "The Betrothed" is essentially patriotic, it is not revolutionary, it is rather reactionary or conservative. Here we have curious paradoxes—a novel dealing with the past of Italy, intended to excite greater love for Italy among Italians, which is the result of alien influences—a novel written in classical Italian which is so romantic that the Italian traditionists, who adored the rules of Aristotle, saw in it belligerent literary radicalism. Manzoni's novel and his dramas, "The Count of Carmagnola" and "The Adelchi," are romantic in the sense in which "Götz von Berlichingen" and "Ivanhoe" are romantic. They deal with Nature, but with Nature seen in the past through the light of imagination. Scott was a rebel against the traditions of the Queen Anne folk, but not a conscious rebel;

besides, the traditions of English literature are natural and romantic. He among us who should return to the unities of Aristotle would find the splendid names of the past arrayed on the opposite side. In Italy and France, Manzoni and Hugo revolted against all the great who had gone to join Dante's group on "the enamelled green" of the terrace of the triumph of fame in the Inferno. In the preface to "The Count of Carmagnola" (1820), Manzoni gives his reasons for a defiance, which Victor Hugo imitated eight years later.

The past of Italy had been looked on as the past of Greece and Rome. Augustus and Virgil together had adopted Greece—or rather, appropriated her—when they modelled the "Æneid" on Homer, who was Greece, and gave it to the world as the expression of Rome's genius and her past. Dante and Italy had adopted Virgil, and, with Virgil, Aristotle, and even Seneca, as masters of literary form. To throw aside the "unities," to vitalize the mediæval lay figures which the writers had hitherto varnished with a classical glue, musty and clogged, was to be both bold and bad. But to go back only two hundred years (the story of "The Betrothed" begins in 1628) and to describe life in all its petty details, to mix episodes of peasant life with realistic pictures of the plague, to paint a parish priest as neither a saint nor a fiend, to represent religion as a conservative force, and at the same time to admit that a priest might be more or less than the average man; to be heroic and commonplace in one and the same chapter—was, in 1825, to shock those Italian Arcadians who sat in the midst of Greek theatrical scenery carefully retouched in accordance with the more modern Latin taste.

The connection between the romanticism of "The Betrothed" and Scott's "Heart of Midlothian" and realism is very close. Romanticism is, in one sense, a revolt; in this sense "The Betrothed" is romantic, though, compared with Reade's "Cloister and the Hearth" or Dumas's "Three Musketeers," it is extremely quiet in its flow of incidents.

It is a far cry from Manzoni to Fogazzaro and Verga, or to the criminologists D'Annunzio and Nicefero; but, if these

men are part of the development of the reaction against artificiality, Manzoni's sanity, simplicity, and return to life helped to strengthen the development which, if carried too far, tends to corruption, or, at best, substitutes the study of the abnormal for the normal.

When the Napoleonic fury had passed away, Milan was under Austrian domination, and only the foolish poet would cry out against a usurpation which at this time was irrevocable; and Manzoni was never a foolish poet. He had too much good sense to risk his peace and his usefulness for the sake of heroic declamation. After his marriage he turned his attention to the making of sacred songs. This, too, was a reaction from the Voltaireism that had dominated Italian literature just before and some time after the French Revolution. Goethe, who was an admirer of Manzoni, has great praise for these lyrics; they put the teachings of theology into the living language of the people, and they are full of force and personal expression. Manzoni, even after the publication of his hymns, was not looked on with high favour by the aristocrats of the monarchy or by the extreme radicals; he proclaimed his adherence to the spiritual power of the Pope, but refused to accept the dictum that the States of the Church should be inviolable. The Austrians offered him honours, which he refused; and when Victor Emmanuel wished to distinguish him, he escaped the decoration by declaring that from the Austrians he had preferred honour to honours, and that he was still of the same opinion.

The point of view of the best-known writers of Italy has been largely influenced in our time by the French naturalistic school. Gabriele d'Annunzio is as much the child of Flaubert as of Lombroso. Verga and Matilda Serao and the rest are regarded by many Italian critics as the result of foreign methods. Early in this century, when the young Italians turned with frantic enthusiasm to Ossian and welcomed translations of Macpherson's rhapsodies into their language, a renaissance of a greater spirit and the necessity for a stronger language were announced. The Ossianic phrase, with its

inversions, compound words, and brevity, was imitated in the Tuscan tongue. The romanticists were even willing to sacrifice their own music for the virile cadences of the new utterances. History repeats itself, and the Italians of to-day, surfeited with music and naturalism, demand a new language. The dissatisfaction with the present condition of Italian literature was recently expressed by Domenico Oliva and Ugo Ojetti.

But the remedy seems to lie where Manzoni found it, in a rational and sympathetic study of human nature. In the storm and stress of the romantic revolt, Manzoni, like Goldsmith in the classical time, goes to Nature in a kindly, sympathetic, even optimistic spirit. The " Vicar of Wakefield " was no doubt considered " vastly low " by those who preferred to read of court ladies; and there is no doubt that when Manzoni made a peasant lad his principal character, he shocked sensibilities accustomed to the woes of the Princess of Cleves or the amours of the half-mythical knights and queens of whom Italian literature is full. It is true that a Cardinal of a princely house flourishes in the novel, but only because of his goodness. The politics of " The Betrothed " is the very opposite of the politics of " The Prince." Machiavelli's theories have no place in Manzoni's plan of patriotism. To be a good citizen, one must first be an honest man: this was Manzoni's prime axiom, and the Italians, after terrible and corrupting political experiences, badly needed to have it accentuated. Insidiously, too, the author who would not bear his ancestral title of Count shows his countrymen that caste is naught compared with personal virtues and qualities, and that adherence to duty alone makes the man worthy. Don Abbondio, the curate, is a figure not merely moulded by a deft hand, but torn out of life. You feel that he is real in his weakness; his defects are chronic because he has permitted the faults of his temperament to neutralize his will power; his sense of duty exists, but practice in self-indulgence has taught him to hypnotize it. Don Abbondio does no evil for the love of evil; in fact, he would prefer to do good, and he would be quite willing to be

the servant of duty, did duty not demand the sacrifice of personal ease. Manzoni's picture of Don Abbondio is wrought with sad sincerity, yet here and there is a touch of unexaggerated humour. And the picture of the priest who had adopted his calling not as a vocation, but as an avocation, is painted with an insight which would seem almost tolerant, if the author's ethical perceptions were not so sternly clear.

In no history can a more convincing sketch of the condition of Italy in the middle of the seventeenth century be found than in the first chapter of this novel, in which the background for the character of Don Abbondio is so very carefully painted. For sixty years the curate had contrived to lead a peacefully selfish life by being neutral in all things; he had not the temptation that a less prudent man might have had to resist the attacks of might against right. The law was impotent; yet a strong man, unfearing, might enforce as well as defy the law. Sanctuaries and asylums—the Christian substitutes for the Hebraic cities of refuge—protected the guilty, and then there were the innumerable privileges of the classes. "The proclamations," Manzoni says, "were efficient, it is true, in fettering and embarrassing the honest man, who had neither power in himself nor protection from others; inasmuch as, in order to reach all persons, they subjected the movements of every private individual to the arbitrary will of a thousand magistrates and executive officers. But he who before the commission of his crime had prepared himself a refuge in some convent or palace where bailiffs never dared to enter, or who simply wore a livery that secured in his defence the vanity or the interest of a powerful family—such a one was free in his actions, and could laugh to scorn every proclamation." Don Rodrigo, one of the privileged class, is practically irresponsible so long as he does not come in contact with a man or a group stronger than he. It was a natural thing for him, knowing as he did the character of Don Abbondio, to intimidate the priest into a flagrant neglect of his duty. This duty was to perform the marriage ceremony for Renzo

Tramaglino and Lucia Mondella. The bravoes, the emissaries of Don Rodrigo, perform their task with neatness and despatch. It is not only "suggested" to Don Abbondio that the marriage must not take place, but the bravoes insist that the priest shall discover a way of preventing it. This is like lashing a new wound. Don Abbondio, discovering that the privileges of his class do not protect him, is willing to compromise quietly with his conscience; but to be expected to invent a method and put this method into execution is too much! He courteously asks for further "suggestions." The bravoes decline to take the initiative from a man who understands Latin. Like the companions of Horatio, in Hamlet, they fancy that the Latinists ought to lead.

"Don Abbondio, il bettore se n'e gia avveduto, non era nato con un cuor di leone" (as the reader will perceive, was not born with a lion's heart), Manzoni remarks. And his system of neutrality would have failed him here, even if the reader had not been so plainly shown that he was not born with the courage of a lion. He has not even the courage, so debilitated has his character become, to assume the privileges of his class. Perpetua, his housekeeper, is admirably drawn, and is the precursor of many of her type in romance literature. Her sympathy is not unmixed with that kind of analysis which makes even the tenderest condolences exasperating. She ought to know that Don Abbondio, being a man, does not at this moment want cold, hard, reasonable advice, though he pretends that he does.

"My opinion is," says Perpetua, "that, as everybody says, our Archbishop is a saint, a man of courage (uomo di polso), and not to be frightened by an ugly phiz, and will take pleasure in upholding a curate against one of these tyrants; I should say, and do say, that you had better write him a handsome letter to inform him as how——"

"Will you be silent? Will you be silent?" demands the wretched curate. "Is this advice to offer a poor man? When I get a bullet in my side—God preserve me!—will the Archbishop take it out?"

Perpetua persists in preaching courage, but without effect, and Don Abbondio goes to rest—a little rest—only to wake without plans, and with a leaden heart.

The results of the curate's cowardice enabled Manzoni to make his book. The simplicity and honesty of Renzo and the womanly fidelity of Lucia are charming. The picture of these two lovers is done most sympathetically. They are not a swan and a nymph of the classical school, or abnormal animals of the naturalistic section. They never lose faith or hope. Renzo's impulsiveness is the quality of the normal man; he is for action; he has not the scruples of Lucia; he is capable of jealousy, too, but his jealousy is as evanescent as it is unreasonable.

The learned Doctor Azzecca-Garbugli, to whom Renzo goes, holding the votive fowls by their necks, is a quack typical of a time of quackery. Later, this species culminated, just before everybody began to dabble in the natural sciences, in Joseph Balsamo, Count Cagliostro. Manzoni's delicacy in treating this scene is not in the usual Italian *buffo* style; one of his finest artistic qualities is his reticence, which saves him from all exaggeration. The episode of Fra Goldino and the nuts is well done, and Lucia's shrewdness in loading him with alms is delightfully characteristic. The three clerics in "The Betrothed" will repay study; they are figures that can not be detached from their social surroundings. Father Cristoforo's story is not singular in Italian annals; crimes like his and conversions like his were common. St. Francis d'Assisi had not sinned, but he had enjoyed the good things of the world as Father Cristoforo had done. And the vengeance of the proud nobles whose relative Cristoforo had killed would have followed the murderer to the end of the world, had he not given up the world in penitence. Having wilfully reduced himself to poverty, with the coarse robe and waist-rope of the mendicant friar about him, he entered the hall of the noble whose brother he had killed. The assemblage was large and brilliant; the host stood, with his hand on the hilt of his sword, waiting for the reparation. Cristoforo knelt and acknowl-

edged his guilt. There was instantly a movement of pity. "My brother," admitted the host, who had hitherto flamed with vengeance, "was a cavalier of hasty temper," and he kissed the repentant friar. Ices and wines, and those marvellous confections which even St. Francis d'Assisi gave up reluctantly, were served—such Italian delicacies as Keats described, "tinct with cinnamon"—but Cristoforo refused them and begged humbly for a loaf of bread. Henceforth, in the opinion of the multitude, the murderer is not merely human, he is a being far above them; he has renounced the world, and in his long fasts and vigils he will bear the burden of their sins; his hands will always be raised in supplication for them.

Monastic prudence is shown in the dealings of Father Cristoforo's Superior with the powerful friend of Don Rodrigo; it was the wisdom of the serpent, which the friars of that time frequently made use of. It was different, however, from the quality that Don Abbondio had cultivated.

Manzoni does not deal in types, but all his characters are typical; they could live only in the atmosphere of post-mediæval Italy. The Cardinal Federigo Borromeo is a splendid prelate; he is a prince, but he never asserts his princeliness; you are made to feel it by the fact that he can not conceive obstacles possible, because they are out of his star. "He was persuaded in the depth of his soul of that which no Christian can deny, that a man has no real superiority over others but in devotion to their good; he dreaded distinction, and sought to avoid it." His cousin, the greater Borromeo, had set him a shining example, and one of his claims to distinction at a time when magnificent velvets and furs covered unclean bodies was that he dressed simply and frequently washed himself.

The Unknown is a terrible being—a true creature of romance, wicked, even "facinorous," as Shakespeare might have said. How Mrs. Radcliffe loved gentlemen like him!—and how all those darkly romantic English writers who revelled in the Italy of Machiavelli, would have elaborated his crimes! But Manzoni begins his conversion with the sight of a pure woman, which is not unnatural, as the Unknown's asso-

ciations may have had much to do with his view of life; and Goethe himself almost saves Faust through the prayers of Margaret. The Unknown—whose name Manzoni will not trust to his readers—determines to see the Cardinal Archbishop, filled with an inarticulate passion to be free from his sins. The meeting of the two is a little masterpiece of psychological insight and delicate description. The tact of the Cardinal is supreme, and we feel as if the most hardened sinner could not resist the charms of this fascinating prelate, who has perfect faith and perfect manners, and whose sincerity is that of a child. The Cardinal Federigo has been accustomed to descend to the needs of the poor without loss of dignity, and he soon discovers the woes of Lucia and Renzo.

"Is it not an astonishing thing," Don Abbondio asks himself, his peace disturbed by this new turn of events, "that the saints, as well as the wicked, have always quicksilver in their veins; and not contented with making a bustle themselves, they would make all mankind, if they could, join the dance with them!" Don Abbondio is taught his duty by the Cardinal, but no human being can make him do more than listen.

Manzoni's famous description of the plague at Milan is the one part of "The Betrothed" that is generally known; it has been quoted and re-quoted, and in English scrap-books it is often found pasted near Charles Brockden Brown's rendering of the yellow-fever visitation in Philadelphia, and Dickens's painting of the Lord Gordon riots in London; and it deserves the attention it has received. It loses something of its simplicity and directness in translation, but it is the model of effects produced by a sure and artistic hand. It is a recital of horrors, yet it does not repel; it has not the reeking atmosphere of D'Annunzio's masterpiece of squalor and pessimism in that church interior in "The Triumph of Death." The realism of Manzoni's description ought to satisfy the demands of the most rigid claimant for photography. If the author of "The Betrothed" was the chief of the Italian romantic school of 1820, he was likewise a realist. There ought to be no distinction between realists, whether they project themselves into the

past or paint from the present. D'Annunzio might have sickened us with the details of Renzo's escape from the infuriated citizens who accused him of being one of the poisoners, but, with all his elaboration, he could not have given us a more vivid picture. The truth is, that one does not think of Manzoni's methods or technique; one is interested in his people, and, after all, what true artist who draws from life can ask more than this? The optimism of Manzoni is not in accord with the modern taste, which has a taint of Schopenhauer; but tastes change, and a time may come when even the parting speech of one of the dreadful *monatti*—"Go, go, you poor poisoner, it will not be you who will destroy Milan!"—may be applauded as the emphasis upon pessimism in Serao and D'Annunzio is applauded now.

In spite of that change in taste, too, which is against both the leisurely introductions of Sir Walter Scott and the comfortably slow manner of Manzoni, "The Betrothed" will always hold its own, for several reasons: ethically, it is sweet and pure; artistically, it is simple and true; historically, it marked a literary epoch; it was the first important book of its kind in Italy; it has stood the test of time, therefore it is a classic.

MAURICE FRANCIS EGAN.

INTRODUCTION

IT is a real pleasure to me to have this opportunity of saying a word in praise of Manzoni's novel *The Betrothed.* It is above all things else a clean, healthy romance, and at the same time elegant, interesting, and instructive. I regard it indeed as a classic; and no Italian at least can lay claim to a knowledge of letters who has not read this work of Manzoni's. For analysis of character, and for understanding of the human heart, he deserves especial praise. And then, he has been so happy in his selection of noble characters, has portrayed them so admirably, that Fra Cristoforo and Federigo Borromeo shed glory upon his pages and uplift the reader to the highest pitch of admiration. The trials and difficulties of the young lovers form the thread of the narrative, which never lags nor grows wearisome. The timidity of Don Abbondio, and his fear of the *bravi*, supply a fund of humor that is delicious in its gentle mirth. Added to this are descriptions of the country surrounding Lakes Como and Lecco that are unrivaled in accuracy and beauty. The author dwells at great length and effectively on the terrible famine of Milan, and the more terrible pestilence that followed in its train, and shows the hand of a genius in describing the unreasonable excesses of a hungry mob, and the ravages of the plague, which mowed down thousands with its merciless scythe.

The Betrothed will be perused with profit, instruction, edification, and interest by all, and to most readers it will bring that rarest of pleasures which comes from association with noble, high-minded, and benevolent characters.

Count Alessandro Manzoni was born in Milan, March 7, 1785. He studied at Milan and Pavia, and at the age of twenty joined his mother in Paris, where he lived ten years, became intimate with the so-called circle of philosophers, and married the daughter of a Genoese banker. In 1816 he returned to Milan, which thenceforth was his home. He began his literary career as a poet, but in the course of it wrote tragedies, romances, and philosophical dissertations. He was a devoted Catholic, converted his Protestant wife to that faith, and became a staunch defender of the Church. *The Betrothed* was first published in 1827. Afterward he took an immense interest in the question of the best form of Italian prose, and re-wrote the whole book in pure Tuscan, issuing it thus in 1840. When Italy was united, he was made a life senator and received a pension of 12,000 francs. He died May 22, 1873. There are several editions of his works, and as many biographies.

SWISS CONFEDERATION
Lake Maggiore
Lake Lugano
Lake Como
DUCHY OF MILAN
Lecco
Como
Bergamo
Trezzo
Monza
Gorgonzola
Milan
Lake Iseo
DUCHY OF SAVOY
River Adda
Casale
River Po
Piacenza
DUCHY OF MONTFERRAT
DUCHY OF PARMA
REPUBLIC OF GENOA
Genoa
LIGURIAN SEA

NORTHERN ITALY,
1628–1630
0 MILES 40
0 KILOMETERS 40
TIROL
LI
C O F V E N I C E
Lake Garda
Verona
Venice
ADRIATIC SEA
DUCHY OF MANTUA
Mantua
River Po
STATES OF THE CHURCH
arma
Modena
DUCHY
OF
MODENA
Bologna
Ravenna
GRAND DUCHY OF
TUSCANY

Introduction

History can veritably be defined as an illustrious war against Time, for by emancipating the years it has imprisoned, and indeed reduced to corpses, it restores them to life, musters them for review and sends them forth into battle anew. The illustrious Champions of History, however, who in this Conflict offer Masses of palm and laurel, plunder only the most glittering and opulent spoils, embalming with ink the Exploits of Princes and Potentates as well as other Eminences, embroidering gold and silk threads with the finest needle of their genius to form a perpetual tapestry of glorious Deeds. Yet my feeble talent is unworthy of the sublime and perilous heights of such arguments, which wander amid Labyrinths, Political Intrigues, and the blaring of the Trumpets of War. Save that, having chanced upon news of memorable events that befell, admittedly, humble laborers of low birth, I gird myself to bequeath such memory to Posterity by relating the Tale, or rather the Report, in its unadorned truth. In which upon a miniature theater one shall behold woeful Tragedies filled with Horrors and Scenes of great Wickedness, with interludes of heroic Feats and angelic goodness to counter the workings of the devil. And verily, in the consideration that our climes are under the protection of our Lord the Catholic King, the Sun that never sets, and that above us shines, by reflected Light, the Moon that never wanes, the Hero of noble lineage, serving pro tempore in the King's stead, and the Multitude of Senators, fixed stars, and the other Esteemed Magistrates, wandering planets casting light everywhere, thereby forming a most noble Firmament. So where shall we seek the cause for this world's transformation into an Inferno of ever increasing tenebrous, wicked, and cruel actions by rash and reckless men if not in the diabolic arts and incantations, since human wickedness alone would not suffice to repel so many Heroes, who with eyes of Argus and arms of Briareus do

traffic in public emoluments. For which reason in relating this Tale that took place in my green years, whereas most of the persons who perform their parts herein have departed the Stage of the World, paying their tributes to the Fates, no mention shall be made of their names, that is of their family relations, also out of due respect. The same practice shall apply to places, for which only the general Territory shall be indicated. Nor shall any man deem this a flaw in the tale, a defect in my rude Creation, lest the selfsame Censor be ignorant of Philosophy. The better schooled men are in Philosophy, the better will they observe that nothing is absent from said Narrative. It being self-evident and universally subscribed to that names are nothing other than pure accidents . . .

—

"By the time I have endured the heroic effort of transcribing this story from the manuscript's faded chicken scratch and, as the saying goes, brought it to light, who will endure the effort of reading it?"

This doubt occurred to me while I was struggling to decipher the scribble that came after the word *accidents.* It forced me to stop my copying and think more seriously about how best to proceed. "It may well be," I said to myself as I leafed through the manuscript, "that this avalanche of conceits and figures of speech will not go on for the entire length of the work. Our seventeenth-century friend wanted to flaunt his virtuosity at the beginning. Later, however, as the story goes on, and at times for long stretches, the style will become more natural and plain. No doubt. But it's so common! So vulgar! So full of mistakes! Lombard idioms abound! Malapropisms, arbitrary grammar, mangled sentences. Not to mention the Spanish flourishes tossed in here and there. What's worse, in the most terrifying and heartrending parts of the story, which should inspire awe or reflection—in every passage, in short, that does indeed require some rhetoric, but a rhetoric that is discreet, refined, and tasteful—he never fails to serve up another helping of what we find in the introduction! By cobbling together the most contradictory qualities with astonishing skill, he manages to sound both uncouth and affected on the same page, in the same sentence, and in the same word. Out come the bombastic declamations, composed of pedestrian solecisms, and everywhere the ambitious awkwardness

so characteristic of the writing of that century, at least in this country. In short, it would be unpresentable to today's readers. They are too sharp and too repelled by this type of extravagance. Thank goodness I realized this at the beginning of this wretched business. I wash my hands of it."

As I was closing the messy compilation to set it back on the shelf, however, it felt wrong for such a beautiful story to remain unknown. Because it was as a story, although the reader might disagree, that I found beautiful, I repeat, quite beautiful. "Why not," I thought, "take the series of events from the manuscript and rewrite them?" Hearing no reasonable objection, I immediately embraced this resolution, which is how the present book originated, as I have explained with a candor equal to the importance of the book.

Some of the events and certain customs described by our author seemed so new, so strange, to put it mildly, that before believing them, I needed to question other witnesses. So I pored through the records of the time, to see if that really was the way of the world in those days. This inquiry cleared all my doubts. At every step I found similar and even more remarkable things. When I came across news of characters whose very existence I had doubted, having never heard of them outside of the manuscript, my mind was made up. I will quote some of these documents, as needed, to lend credibility to things whose strangeness might make the reader inclined to deny them.

But in rejecting our author's diction as unacceptable, what shall I replace it with? This is the crux of the matter.

Anyone who barges in uninvited to redo another man's work might be asked to render a strict accounting of his own, and, in a sense, is required to. This rule is both *de facto* and *de jure,* and I claim no immunity from it. Indeed, to be as compliant as possible, I had planned to provide a detailed explanation of the style of writing I adopted. With this in mind, throughout my work I tried to foresee every imaginable criticism, in order to offer a preemptive rebuttal. Nor would this have been difficult, since (in all honesty) I could not think of a single criticism for which there was not a triumphant

reply, and a reply of the type that does not so much settle questions as restate them. I often set two criticisms within arm's reach of each other and let them fight it out. Or by examining them closely, comparing them carefully, I was able to discover and to prove that although they appeared to be contradictory, they made the same mistake of neglecting the facts and principles upon which their opinions should have been based. Then, to their great surprise, I put the two criticisms together and sent them both packing.

No author would ever have provided such solid proof that he had done a good job. And then? When I was about to herd together all the objections and rebuttals and arrange them in some sort of order, Lord have mercy! They amounted to a book! So I set aside my proposal for two reasons with which the reader will certainly concur: the first, that it might seem ridiculous to write one book to justify another, or rather, its style; the second, that one book at a time is quite enough, if not too much.

THE judges who, at Milan in 1630, condemned to a horrible death certain persons accused of spreading the plague by methods no less stupid than disgusting, thought they were doing something so worthy of record that, in the very sentence of condemnation, along with a clause ordering the destruction of their victims' houses, they decreed that in the space where these houses had stood a pillar be erected, to be called the 'Column of Infamy', and on this pillar an inscription written where all posterity might read of the crime which they had prevented and the punishment they had imposed. And they were right; that judgement of theirs was indeed memorable.

In the course of the preceding work[1] the author stated his intention of one day publishing some account of this affair. And this promise he now fulfils: but in offering his account to the public he is uncomfortably aware that some of his readers were expecting something much longer and more learned. Yet, while he is ready to be mocked by those whom he has disappointed, he feels free to disclaim responsibility for their expectations: if he has only a mouse to offer, he never said that mountains were giving birth. All he said was that while a concern for brevity prevented him from including the affair as an episode in his novel, and though he was aware that it had already been discussed by a deservedly famous writer,[2] he considered nevertheless that the subject might very well be studied afresh and from

[1] *I promessi sposi*, Ch. XXXII, *in fine*.

[2] Count Pietro Verri, 1728–97; Milanese writer and social reformer. In 1764, with his brother Alessandro and Cesare Beccaria, he founded the short-lived but important journal *Il Caffè*, for the propagation of liberal and progressive ideas in literature, politics, and economics. Broadly speaking, Verri and his circle were the Milanese counterpart of the French Encyclopaedists. Though loyal to the Austrian Empire (to which Milan then belonged) Verri welcomed the French Revolution. His *Osservazioni sulla tortura* was written in 1777 but not published until 1804 (see p. xvii). [Tr.]

a different point of view. Let this difference suffice to explain why the present work was undertaken. Whether it has been usefully undertaken is another question; which, alas, has more to do with effects than with causes.

Pietro Verri was concerned, as the title of his book suggests, to draw from the affair in question an argument against torture; inasmuch as the only effect of torture, in this case, had been to extort confessions to a crime that was physically and morally impossible. And his argument was as cogent as his intentions were noble and humane.

But from the history of a matter so complex as this (however briefly it may be described) and of so much evil inflicted without reason by men on their fellow men it should, I think, be possible to draw conclusions of a more general character and of an equal, if less immediate, utility. Indeed there is a danger in restricting one's comments only to such points as are most relevant to the particular argument referred to above; the danger, I mean, that the reader might come to take a view of the episode that would be not only incomplete but also false; for he might ascribe its evils merely to the ignorance prevalent in those times and to a barbarous legal system, and so come to think of them as necessitated and inevitable; which would be to deduce a mischievous falsehood from data which could be most instructive. Ignorance of natural science may have undesirable effects, but it cannot cause wickedness. Nor do bad institutions function automatically. It was certainly no necessary result of believing in the infectiousness of certain unguents to believe that Guglielmo Piazza and Giangiacomo Mora had used them; and the fact that the law in those days had recourse to torture did not compel the judges in this case to apply torture to all the accused, nor to find guilty all whom they tortured. This is a truth that may seem too obvious to be interesting; but it not infrequently happens that the most obvious truths, which ought to be taken for granted, are in fact forgotten; and it is only by not forgetting the truth I have stated that one can form a right judgement on that appalling sentence. What I have attempted, then, is to bring this truth into the light of day; to show clearly that those

judges were guilty of condemning men who were innocent and men whose innocence they were perfectly capable of recognizing, notwithstanding their conviction of the infectiousness of the unguents and notwithstanding the laws permitting the use of torture. I will go further and say that in order to find those persons guilty, in order to suppress the truth which appeared and reappeared all the time and on every side, and with features as visible then as they are now and always will be, the judges had continually to exercise the utmost ingenuity and have recourse again and again to expedients of the injustice of which they could not have been ignorant. It would of course be absurd, and also dishonourable, to attempt to deny that ignorance and torture had their share in the vile business. A deplorable ignorance gave the evil its chance in the first place, and torture was the cruel weapon it found ready to hand (though not, certainly, the only nor the chief one). But what matters, I think, is that we grasp the real and effective cause of what was done. And what could this have been if not a passionate perversion of the human heart?

Only God could see clearly into the hearts of those judges and measure the exact degree of control that emotion had gained over their wills. Anger, no doubt, played its part, stirred up by a vague sense of undefined dangers; an anger that desired an object on which to vent itself and so clutched at the first that came to hand; anger impatient for evidence and that would not listen to the thought that the evidence in fact presented might be false; which had cried 'At last!' and now absolutely refused to say 'We must start again': an anger made pitiless by prolonged fear and now become a self-righteous hatred of its poor struggling victims. Again, there was a fear of seeming not to respond to what the public was expecting, with an expectation as confident as it was hasty and rash; a fear of seeming less intelligent if the accused were found innocent; a fear that if the clamour of the crowd were not heeded it would turn against themselves; a fear too, perhaps, that resistance to that clamour might provoke a serious disturbance of the peace—which may seem a more respectable sort of fear but which is really no less

evil and ignoble, if it usurp the place of that other, that genuinely wise and noble fear of committing an injustice. Only God could tell whether those magistrates who found people guilty of a crime they had never committed, but which others desired them to have committed,[3] were more the accomplices or the tools of a public blinded not by ignorance but by rancour and rage, and whose clamour for revenge was directly opposed to the divine law which it professed to revere. So much only God could judge; but lying, and abuse of power, and violation of the ordinary and obvious rules of behaviour, and playing tricks with the scales of justice—such things we men can recognize for ourselves, when they occur; and, having recognized them, we can relate them with absolute certainty to the passions which corrupt the human will. Nor need any other passions be looked for, as we seek to understand the objective iniquities of that court of law, than the anger and the fear I have mentioned: both natural enough, and both vile.

Such causes of crime are not, unfortunately, confined to a particular age; nor can the fact that emotion—these particular passions and others—have driven men who were anything but professional criminals to public or private wickedness be attributed solely to such ignorance of natural science as may have occasioned their crimes, or to their having had the power to inflict torture. 'If,' wrote Verri, 'only one torture the less be inflicted in future, as an effect of my having described these horrors, I shall consider that the grief that impels me to write will not have been in vain; and in this hope I find my consolation.'[4] And for my part I shall consider it well worth while to have reminded my readers of horrors they already know if, by so doing, I can stir their indignation also, and chiefly, against the influence of evil passions—which cannot indeed be discarded like false ideas, nor abolished like harsh institutions, but which can at least be rendered less potent and poisonous by recognizing and detesting their effects.

Moreover this way of looking at the matter has its consoling

[3] *Ut mos vulgo, quamvis falsis, reum subdere.* Tacitus, *Annales*, I, 39.
[4] *Osservazioni sulla tortura*, c. vi.

side. If we regard a complex series of cruelties inflicted by man on man merely as the effect of times and circumstances, the horror and pity we feel is accompanied by a sense of discouragement, by a sort of despair. We seem to see human nature driven irresistibly to evil by forces beyond its control, caught in the toils of some evil and exhausting dream which it can neither throw off nor even become clearly conscious of. And so the indignation that spontaneously springs up in us against the men who did such things begins itself to appear unreasonable, even while, at the same time, we feel it to be noble and religious. Our horror remains, but the deed itself seems to have lost its guilt; and our mind, seeking the true culprit, the right object for its revulsion, is dismayed to find itself hesitating between two alternatives, equally blasphemous and insane: a denial, or an indictment, of Providence. But if, on a closer examination of the facts, we are able to discern an injustice which those who committed it could themselves have recognized; a violation of rules which they themselves accepted; an acting in clean contradiction to principles not only admitted in that age but also evidently respected, in similar circumstances, by the very men who acted in this way—then we can with relief conclude that if these men did not know what they were doing it was because they did not choose to know, and that theirs was the kind of ignorance which men adopt and discard as they please; not an excuse for crime, but itself a crime; and that such things as they did may indeed be suffered, but not done, under compulsion.

With all this I do not want to suggest that Pietro Verri was entirely unaware of the personal and voluntary injustice of the judges in this case; but only that he did not make it his business to study this aspect of the matter, still less to prove that such injustice was the chief—or, more precisely, the sole—cause of the sentence which they passed. Indeed, he could not have carried out this demonstration without, in effect, spoiling his case against torture; the upholders of which (for the most irrational institutions never lack supporters so long as there is life in them at all, and even when dead they often still find upholders for the same reasons which once kept them alive)

would have turned the proof of the judges' wickedness into a defence of torture. 'Don't you see,' they would have replied, 'the fault is not in the system but in those who abuse it.' A strange defence indeed—to point out that something in any case absurd has also served, in certain cases, as passion's tool for deeds both absurd and atrocious. Such, however, is the usual reasoning of prejudiced minds. But in any case those who aimed, like Verri, at the abolition of torture had no wish to complicate their case with distinctions, nor to make torture itself seem less horrible by denouncing anything else. Experience would have taught them that whoever strives to inculcate a truth which is in dispute is apt to find his own supporters, as well as his adversaries, a hindrance to its perfect elucidation. True, he can always count on that very numerous third party of the neutral, the indifferent, the unconcerned; those for whom that truth has no interest whatsoever.

As regards the materials for the story I am about to relate, I must say at the outset that all my efforts to discover the original minutes of the trial—efforts which have met with the most courteous and diligent co-operation on the part of those who seemed best able to help me—have only led me to the conclusion that this document is irretrievably lost. A considerable portion of the minutes, however, survives in a copy. It happened that one of the accused, Don Juan Padilla (who, by the way, owed this unhappy position to one of his fellow victims), was a man of some importance, being the son of the Governor of the Castle of Milan, a Knight of St. James, and a captain in the cavalry. This gentleman was able to have a copy of his defence printed, to which he added an abstract of the trial communicated to him in his capacity as one formally charged with the crime in question. And certainly the judges had no suspicion, when they permitted the printing of this record, that they were erecting a monument more solid and enduring than that which they had built by an architect.

There is also extant another copy, in some places less complete, in others more so, of this abstract. It belonged to Conte Pietro Verri and was placed at my disposal, with a courtesy

both generous and patient, by his son Conte Gabriele. It is in fact the document used by Verri in writing his book and it has marginal jottings in his hand reflecting the thoughts that passed through his mind, and the feelings of pity, distress, and indignation that moved him as he read it. It is entitled *Summarium offensivi contra Don Johannem Cajetanum de Padilla.* Many points are more fully reported in this copy than in the printed abstract. Numbers in the margins refer to the pages of the original minutes of the trial, and there are brief notes in Latin due to the same hand as wrote the text: *detentio Morae*; *descriptio domini Johannis*; *adversatur commissario*; *inverisimile*; *subgestio*, etc.—obviously, notes made by the barrister who was defending Padilla. From all this it appears that we have here a literal copy of the official abstract communicated to the defending counsel; and that when the latter had the text printed he caused the printers to strike out certain matters as unimportant and give a mere *résumé* of others. But why does the printed version include things omitted in the manuscript? A likely explanation is that the defending counsel had been able to re-read the original minutes and so make a fresh selection of material which he thought might be useful to his client.

From these two abstracts then, the printed one and the manuscript, I have naturally drawn most of my materials; and since the former has recently been reprinted (it had hitherto been extremely rare) the reader may, if he likes, use it to check the facts which I have culled from the manuscript copy.

The speeches for the defence, referred to above, have also provided certain facts and the material for some observations. As these have never been reprinted and very few copies are extant, I shall be careful to quote *verbatim* such passages from them as I have occasion to use.

Finally, a few details have been picked up from sundry scattered documents surviving from that confused and rather careless epoch, and now preserved in the archives to which reference was made, more than once, in the foregoing work.[5]

To my account of the trial I thought it worth while to subjoin

[5] *I promessi sposi.*

a brief history of the opinions held with regard to it down to the time of Verri, that is for a century and a half; I mean, the opinions which found expression in books; these being for the most part the only ones of which we can know anything with certainty, and being, in any case, those which have a special importance. It will, I think, be found curious to watch a succession of writers following one after the other, like the sheep in Dante, without taking the slightest trouble to inform themselves about the matter on which they were writing. I say 'curious', not 'amusing'; for the spectator of that bitter conflict, which ended so horribly with a victory of error over truth and brute force over unarmed innocence, can feel nothing but distaste, I had almost said exasperation, as he reads these writings (and the particular author makes no difference, they are all the same), with their pompous assertions of falsehood, their smug dogmatizing on a basis of irresponsible credulity; so much denunciation of the victims, all that topsyturvy indignation. Yet the distaste will not be futile if it serve to increase any reader's aversion from and distrust of the old and never sufficiently discredited habit of repeating things without examining them; of—if I may so express myself—serving the public with wine of its own making, and which has sometimes gone to its head already.

With this in mind I thought at first of putting before the reader all the judgements on the matter in hand of all the writers I had read who had anything to say about it. But on second thoughts I decided to spare the reader's patience. Better, I thought, to limit myself to a few authors, of whom none are completely forgotten, while most have still fame enough to make their errors particularly instructive, now that they have lost their power to do harm.

Chapter 1

The branch of Lake Como that turns south between two unbroken mountain chains, bordered by coves and inlets that echo the furrowed slopes, suddenly narrows to take the flow and shape of a river, between a promontory on the right and a wide shoreline on the opposite side. The bridge that joins the two sides at this point seems to make this transformation even more visible to the eye and mark the spot where the lake ends and the Adda begins again, to reclaim the name *lake* where the shores, newly distant, allow the water to spread and slowly pool into fresh inlets and coves. Formed from the sediment of three large streams, the shoreline lies at the foot of two neighboring mountains, the first called San Martino, the second, in Lombard dialect, the "Resegone"—the big saw—after the row of many small peaks that really do make it look like one. So clear is the resemblance that no one—provided they are directly facing it, from the northern walls of Milan, for example—could fail to immediately distinguish this summit from other mountains in that long and vast range with more obscure names and more common shapes. For a good stretch the shore rises upward into a smooth rolling slope. Then it breaks off into small hills and ravines, steep inclines and flat terraces, molded by the contours of the two mountains and the erosion of the waters. The water's edge, cut by the outlets of the streams, is almost all pebbles and stones. The rest is fields and vineyards, dotted with towns, villages, and hamlets. Here and there a woods climbs up the side of the mountain.

Lecco, the capital that lends its name to the province, stands at a short remove from the bridge, and is on and indeed partly inside

the lake when the water rises. Nowadays it is a large town well on its way to becoming a city. At the time of the events I am about to relate, this already good-sized village was also fortified, which conferred upon it the honor of a commander in residence, and the benefit of a permanent garrison of Spanish soldiers, who taught modesty to the girls and women of the town, gave an occasional tap on the back to a husband or father, and, at summer's end, never failed to spread out into the vineyards to thin the grapes and relieve the peasants of the trouble of harvesting them.

Roads and footpaths used to run—and still do—from town to town, from summit to shore, from hill to hill. Some are more or less steep; some are level. In places they dip, sinking between two walls, and all you can see when you look up is a patch of sky and a mountaintop. In others they climb to open embankments, where the view encompasses a broader panorama, always rich, always new, depending on the vantage point and how much of the vast expanse can be seen, and on whether the landscape protrudes or recedes, stands out from or disappears into the horizon.

One piece, then another, then a long stretch of that vast and varied mirror of water. Over here, the lake—terminating at the far end or vanishing into a cluster, a procession of mountains—slowly growing wider between yet more mountains that unfold before the eyes, one by one, whose image, alongside that of the towns by the lake, is reflected upside down in the water. Over there, a bend in the river, then more lake, then river again disappearing into a shiny ribbon curling between the mountains on either side, and slowly descending to vanish on the horizon.

The place from which you contemplate these varied sights offers its own display on every side. The mountain along whose slopes you walk unfolds its peaks and crags above and around you, distinct, prominent, changing with every step, opening and then circling into ridges where a lone summit had at first appeared. The shapes that were reflected in the lake only minutes before now appear close to the summit. The tame, pleasant foothills temper the wild landscape and enhance the magnificence of the other vistas.

Along one of these footpaths, on the evening of the seventh day of November in 1628, Don Abbondio, the parish priest of one of the villages just mentioned, was making his way home from a leisurely walk. (Neither here nor elsewhere does the manuscript give the name of his parish or family.) He was calmly reciting the Liturgy of the Hours. Occasionally, between one psalm and another, he would close his breviary, keeping his right index finger inside as a bookmark. Clasping his hands together behind his back, he would continue his walk, staring at the ground and kicking toward the wall any stones that got in the way. Then he would look up, let his eyes wander idly, and gaze at the wide and uneven splashes of purple on the cliffs, painted there by the light of the setting sun that had peeked through crevices in the mountain on the opposite shore.

After opening his breviary again and reciting another passage, he came to a curve in the path where it was always his custom to look up from his book and stare straight ahead. Today was no different. Past the curve, the road continued straight for another sixty steps or so and then split into two lanes, in a *Y* shape. The path to the right went up the mountain and toward the rectory. The one to the left went down to the valley as far as a stream. On that side the wall was only waist high.

The inner walls of the two lanes converged not on a corner but on a roadside shrine painted with long, wavy figures that ended in a point. In the intentions of the artist and to the eyes of the neighborhood residents they depicted tongues of fire, alternating with vague figures representing souls in purgatory. The souls and flames were brick-red against a gray background that was mottled in spots where the plaster had flaked off.

As he turned the corner and directed his gaze, as usual, toward the shrine, the priest noticed something unexpected that he would rather not have seen. Two men were facing each other at the spot where the two lanes meet. The first was sitting astride the low wall, one leg dangling on the outside and one foot planted on the ground. His companion stood, leaning against the opposite wall, arms folded over his chest. Their clothing, demeanor, and expression—or what

little the priest could discern from a distance—left little doubt as to their station in life.

Around his head each man was wearing a loose-knit green stocking cap underneath which a thick forelock poked out; the cap hung down to the left shoulder and ended in a large tassel. Both had a long mustache curled to a tip; a shiny leather belt with two pistols attached; a small powder horn dangling over his chest like a pendant; a knife handle sticking out of one pocket of his wide, baggy britches; and a longsword whose large hilt was covered with shiny brass fretwork in the shape of a monogram. At a glance you could see they were letting themselves be known as members of the *bravi* species.

This species, which is extinct nowadays, flourished in Lombardy at that time and already had for decades. For those who know nothing about them, here are some excerpts from original documents that indicate their main characteristics, the efforts made to eradicate them, and their hardy, enduring vitality.

On the eighth of April in the year 1583, the Most Illustrious and Excellent Don Carlos of Aragon, Prince of Castelvetrano, Duke of Terranuova, Marquis of Avola, Count of Burgeto, Grand Admiral, and Grand Constable of Sicily, Governor of Milan, and Captain-General of His Catholic Majesty in Italy, *fully apprised of the intolerable misery in which this city of Milan has lived and lives, by reason of bravi and vagrants,* published a decree against them. *He hereby declares and defines as included in this decree, to be deemed bravi and vagrants, all those who . . . whether foreign or native, having no occupation or, having one, do not exercise it . . . but rather, without a salary, or even with one, attach themselves to some member of the nobility or the gentry, an official or a merchant . . . to protect and serve him, or in truth, as can be presumed, to do injury to others* . . . He ordered all of them to leave the city within six days, threatened the recalcitrant with jail, and gave the officers of the law the broadest and most indefinite emergency powers to execute the order. But the following year, on the twelfth of April, the same nobleman, observing *that this City is still filled with said bravi . . . who have gone back to living as they previously had, without any alteration in their*

behavior or decrease in their numbers, issued another more vigorous and remarkable decree in which, among other things, he ordered:

That any person, whether of this City or foreign, whom two witnesses testify is deemed and commonly reputed to be a bravo, and bears such a title, even if he has committed no crime . . . for the sole reputation of being a bravo, without any other evidence, can by said judges and by each and every one of them be interrogated through the corda *and torture . . . and even if he does not confess to any crime, can nevertheless be sent to the galleys for a three-year sentence solely for having the reputation and title of bravo.** All this, and more that I have omitted, because *His Excellency is resolved to be obeyed by all.*

Such bold and confident words, from such a figure, and accompanied by such orders, might lead you to believe that, at the mere sound of them, the bravi had all disappeared forever. But the testimony of a nobleman no less authoritative, and no less decorated with titles, compels us to believe the contrary. I am referring to the Most Illustrious and Excellent Juan Fernández de Velasco, Constable of Castile, Lord High Chamberlain of His Majesty, Duke of the City of Frias, Count of Haro and Castelnovo, Lord of the House of Velasco, and of the House of the Seven Infantes of Lara, Governor of the State of Milan, etc. On the fifth of June in the year 1593, likewise fully apprised *of the rack and ruin brought . . . by the bravi and vagrants, and the deleterious effect that this sort of person has on the public good, and in violation of the law,* he ordered them once again, within six days, to clear out of the city, repeating almost the exact same prohibitions and threats as his predecessor. Then on the twenty-third of May in the year 1598, *having with no small displeasure been informed that . . . every day in this City and State the number of these [*bravi and vagrants*] is growing, nor is any news heard about them, night and day, other than deliberately inflicted wounds, murders and robberies, and every other type of crime, to which they lend themselves willingly, confident that they will*

* In the form of torture known as the *corda* or *strappado,* the victim's wrists were bound behind his back by a rope (*corda*) and then pulled into the air (*strappado*), thereby dislocating his shoulders.

be protected by their leaders and advocates . . . prescribed once again the same remedies, doubling the dose, the way you might treat a stubborn illness. *Everyone therefore,* he concludes, *shall always and everywhere beware of disobeying any part of the present decree, because rather than enjoy the clemency of His Excellency, he will suffer the severity of his wrath . . . since he is resolute and determined that this shall be the final and ultimate warning.*

But such was not the persuasion of the Most Illustrious and Excellent Don Pietro Enriquez de Acevedo, Count of Fuentes, Captain, and Governor of the state of Milan. And for good reason. *Fully informed of the misery in which this City and State lie because of the large number of bravi that abound in it . . . and resolved to completely eradicate this most pernicious seed,* he issued, on the fifth of December in the year 1600, a new decree also containing the harshest punishments, *with the firm resolution that, with all severity, and without hope of remission, shall be executed in all of its parts.*

There is reason to believe, however, that the Count did not invest in the decree all the goodwill he had put into hatching plots and rallying enemies against his great enemy, Henry IV, the King of France. Since history illustrates primarily the manner in which he armed the Duke of Savoy against said king, thereby causing the latter to lose more than one city; and how he managed to enlist the Duke of Biron in a plot against him, thereby causing him to lose his head.* As for the bravi, however, that "most pernicious seed," they were still alive and well on the twenty-second of September in the year 1612. On that day the Most Illustrious and Excellent Don Juan de Mendozza, Marquis de la Hynojosa, Lord etc., Governor, etc., dedicated serious thought to eradicating them. So he sent the usual decree, corrected and expanded, to the royal printers, Pandolfo and Marco Tullio Malatesta. But the bravi were still thriving on the

* The Count of Fuentes (1525–1610) was governor of Milan from 1600 to 1610; the Duke of Savoy, Charles Emmanuel I (1562–1630), the son-in-law of Philip II of Spain, waged war against Henry IV over the Marquisate of Saluzzo, a French protectorate; Charles de Gontaut, the Duke of Biron (1562–1602), was a marshal under Henry IV, beheaded for conspiring against the King on behalf of Spain and Savoy.

twenty-fourth of December in the year 1618, when they were likewise and more heavily struck by a decree from the Most Illustrious and Excellent Don Gomez Suarez de Figueroa, Duke of Feria, etc., Governor, etc. But, since that effort failed to kill them off, the Most Illustrious and Excellent Gonzalo Fernández de Córdoba, under whose rule Don Abbondio was taking his walk, found himself forced to revise and republish the usual decree against the bravi, on the fifth day of October 1627: that is to say, one year, one month, and two days before this memorable encounter.

Nor was this the final decree, but I see no need to mention the others, since they fall outside the period of our story. I will cite only one, on the thirteenth of February 1632, in which the Most Illustrious and Excellent Duke of Feria, Governor for a second term, advises us that *the greatest atrocities are committed by the so-called bravi.* This should reassure us that, during the period I am describing, the bravi were still around.

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It was all too clear that the two men described above were waiting for someone. But what most displeased Don Abbondio was the forced realization, from certain gestures, that the someone they were waiting for was him. Because as soon as he appeared, they exchanged glances and raised their heads, as if they had both just said: "It's him." The sitting man stood up, lowering his leg to the path. His partner peeled himself off the wall. Both started moving toward him. Keeping his breviary open in front of him, as if he were reading, Don Abbondio forced himself to look up, to keep an eye on their movements. Seeing them advance toward him, he was suddenly assailed by a thousand thoughts. He quickly asked himself whether between the bravi and himself there was not perhaps some way out, to the right or left. Just as quickly he remembered there was none. He conducted a rapid self-examination, wondering whether he had offended some powerful man, someone vindictive. But even in the midst of his agitation, he was somewhat reassured by the consoling testimony of his conscience. Still the bravi approached, staring straight at him. He placed the index and middle fingers of

his left hand inside his collar, as if to adjust it. And while the two fingers circled his neck, he turned his head to look back at the same time as he twisted his mouth into a grimace. From the corner of his eye, he tried to see as far as he could whether someone else was coming. But he saw no one. He stole a peek over the low wall toward the fields: no one. A cowering glance at the road ahead: no one except the bravi. What was he to do? Turn back? Too late. Take to his heels? He might as well say, "Come and get me," or worse. Unable to avoid the danger, he rushed into it, since the uncertainty was so painful that all he wanted was to get it over with. He quickened his step, recited a verse in a louder voice, settled his face into as calm and cheerful an expression as he could manage, and made every effort to prepare a smile. Once he found himself before these two upright citizens, he said to himself, "Here we go," and stopped in his tracks.

"Reverend Father," said one of the two, staring him in the face.

"At your service," Don Abbondio immediately replied, looking up from his book, which remained open in his hands, as if resting on a lectern.

"Is it your intention," the second man continued, with the angry, menacing look of someone who has caught an underling in the act of doing some mischief, "is it your intention to marry Renzo Tramaglino and Lucia Mondella tomorrow?"

"Beg your pardon," replied Don Abbondio, his voice shaking, "beg your pardon. My good sirs, you are men of the world. You know perfectly well how these matters go. The poor priest has nothing to do with it! Young people make a mess of things and then . . . and then they come to us, the way you'd go to a bank for money. And we . . . we are servants of the common good."

"Well, then," the bravo said in his ear, but in the solemn tone of a command, "this marriage ain't gonna happen. Not tomorrow, not never."

"But, my good sirs," Don Abbondio replied, in the mild, gentle voice used to persuade the impatient, "but, my good sirs, be so gra-

cious as to put yourselves in my shoes. If it were up to me . . . you must know that I'm none the richer for any of this . . ."

"Enough talk!" interrupted the bravo. "Running your mouth isn't going to fix this. Not another word out of you. Consider this fair warning . . . Have we made ourselves clear?"

"My good sirs, you are too kind, too reasonable . . ."

"But," broke in the second man, who had not spoken so far, "the marriage ain't gonna happen, or else . . ." he uttered a loud expletive, "or else the man who performs it won't have the time to regret it, and . . ." another expletive.

"Shut up!" the first speaker cut in. "The Reverend Father is a man who knows the ways of the world. And we are honorable men who mean him no harm, so long as he does the right thing. Reverend, the illustrious Don Rodrigo, our lord and master, holds you in high esteem."

The name flashed across Don Abbondio's mind like a bolt of lightning at the peak of a nighttime storm, illuminating everything in disarray for a moment and creating even greater panic. Almost instinctively he made a deep bow and said, "If you could suggest a way out . . ."

"What! You, who speak Latin, want our suggestions?" the bravo interrupted again, with a laugh that was both uncouth and savage. "I'm sure you can think of something. Above all, don't breathe a word of this warning. We're telling you for your own good. And if you do talk . . . *snick* . . . it would be as bad if you'd gone ahead and married them. So, do you have any message for the illustrious Don Rodrigo?"

"My respects . . ."

"Speak up!"

"Always . . . always at his disposal," and as he uttered these words, not even the priest himself could tell whether he was making a promise or paying a compliment. The bravi took it, or pretended to take it, in the more serious sense.

"That will be fine, and good night, sir," one of the men said as he

departed with his partner. Don Abbondio, who moments earlier would have given his eyeteeth to steer clear of them, now attempted to prolong the conversation and the negotiation. "Sirs . . ." he began, closing the book between his hands. But without paying him further heed, they took the path by which he had come, singing a bawdy song as they went that I would rather not transcribe. Poor Don Abbondio was left with his jaw hanging, as if he were under a spell. Then he took the path that led to his house, struggling to move his legs, which felt as if they had cramped up. How he felt inside is a matter we'll understand better once I've said a few things about his character and the times in which he happened to live.

Don Abbondio (as the reader will have already noted) was not born with the heart of a lion. From his earliest years, the notion was forced upon him that, in those days, nothing could be worse than to be an animal without claws or teeth yet no inclination to be devoured. The police did nothing to protect the law-abiding, inoffensive man who had no means to intimidate others. Not that there was any lack of laws and punishments against acts of personal aggression: Indeed, there was an overabundance of them. The crimes were enumerated and defined at tedious, meticulous length. The punishments were wildly exorbitant. As if that were not enough, in almost every case they could be increased, at will, by the Governor himself and by one hundred officers of the law. Trials were designed solely to free the judge from any impediment to passing sentence. The excerpts from the decrees against the bravi I have reported are only a small but representative sample. Despite or rather largely because of this, the decrees, republished and reinforced from one government to the next, served as little more than bombastic proof of their authors' impotence. When they did produce an immediate effect, it was mainly to add to the many vexations that the weak and law-abiding already suffered at the hands of their tormentors, and to increase the cunning and violence of the latter. Impunity was systematic and had roots that the decrees did not touch or could not dislodge.

Such were the immunities and privileges of certain classes,

partly recognized by the law, partly tolerated in resentful silence or contested in vain protests, but maintained and jealously guarded by the social classes themselves through self-serving and defensive actions. At every threat and every insult, this impunity—threatened and offended but not eliminated by the decrees—had, of course, to make new efforts and find new means to preserve itself. And this is, in effect, what happened. The moment a decree appeared, the violent found new, more opportune means, through their power, to continue doing exactly what the decrees had sought to repress. At every turn they could easily harass and lock up an honest citizen who had no power or protection of his own. Because in order to keep every man under control, and to prevent or punish every crime, the decrees subjected every move by a private citizen to the arbitrary will of any number of executors. But any man who, before committing a crime, had arranged to seek ready sanctuary in a monastery or a palace where the police would never dare to set foot; and any man, with no protection other than the livery that bound a powerful family, indeed an entire social class, to defend him for the sake of its vanity and interests, was free to do as he liked, and could scoff at the bombast of the decrees.

The men appointed to enforce the decrees included some who belonged by birth to the privileged class, and others who depended on its patronage. Both groups—by education, self-interest, custom, and imitation—had embraced that class's principles and were loath to offend them in deference to the broadsheet decrees posted on street corners. Even if they had been as daring as heroes, obedient as monks, and inclined to sacrifice as martyrs, the men appointed to promptly execute the laws would still have been unable to perform their duties, since they were fewer in number to the men they were supposed to subdue, and in all likelihood they would be forsaken by those who, in the abstract and in theory, so to speak, had given them their orders. Not to mention that the enforcers were generally the most abject criminals of their day, reviled even by the men who should have feared them. Their very title was used as an insult. So rather than take risks or throw away their lives on a hopeless enter-

prise, they sold their inaction or even their collusion to the powerful, of course, and reserved the exercise of their detested authority and the powers they enjoyed for occasions when there was no danger; namely, the oppression and harassment of the law-abiding and defenseless.

The man who wishes to offend, or forever fears receiving offense, will naturally seek out allies and partners. In those days there was a peak in the tendency of individuals to affiliate in social classes and form new ones, and for each to accumulate as much power as he could for his own class. The clergy vigilantly supported and extended its immunities, the nobility its privileges, the military its exemptions. The merchants and skilled craftsmen enrolled in corporations and confraternities, the jurists established a league, and even the doctors formed a guild. Each of these little oligarchies had its own special power. And within each the individual benefited from the combined forces of the many, which he could exploit in proportion to his authority and skill. The most honest used this advantage only for self-defense. The cunning and the violent exploited it to commit their crimes—for which their personal means alone would have been insufficient—with full impunity. The forces of these various leagues were not evenly matched, however. In the countryside, a rich, violent nobleman, surrounded by a band of bravi and a peasant population that regarded itself—out of family tradition, self-interest, or coercion—as subjects and soldiers of the master, could wield a power that other factions of the league would find hard to resist.

Our Don Abbondio was neither noble, nor rich, nor especially courageous. He realized, even before reaching the age of discretion, that in such a society he was like a clay pot forced to travel in the company of many an iron kettle. So he readily obeyed his parents' wish for him to become a priest. The truth is he hadn't given much thought to the duties and noble purposes of his chosen ministry. Procuring a life of ease and a position in a strong, revered class seemed more than sufficient reason for such a choice. But a person can be protected or kept safe by his class only up to a point.

No class affiliation dispenses him from developing his own particular system of defense. Don Abbondio, constantly absorbed in thoughts of his own peace of mind, did not concern himself with advantages that required hard work or a modicum of risk. His system consisted primarily in avoiding all conflict and backing down from the ones he could not avoid. He offered unarmed neutrality in all the wars erupting around him, from the frequent disputes that used to break out between the clergy and the secular mayors, soldiers and civilians, nobleman and nobleman, all the way down to disputes between two peasants sparked by a word and settled by fists or daggers. When he was forced to choose between two contenders, he always sided with the stronger party, but always cautiously, taking care to show the other party that he had no choice in the matter, as if to say, "Why couldn't you have been the stronger man? Then I would have taken your side." By steering clear of bullies, pretending not to notice their momentary, capricious abuses, responding meekly to the ones with graver, more premeditated intentions, and forcing even the gruffest and most contemptuous to smile, through his bowing and jovial deference, when he ran into them on the street, the poor man had managed to make it past the age of sixty without much trouble.

Not that he did not harbor some resentment. The constant testing of his patience, the frequent concessions to others, the many bitter pills swallowed in silence, had exasperated him so much that his health would surely have suffered had he not occasionally vented. But since in the end there were people in the world, close to him, that he knew could do him no harm, he could take out his long repressed annoyance on them, and indulge in the pleasure of losing his temper and unleashing some misdirected shouts. He was a harsh critic of men who did not behave like him, but only when he could voice his criticism without even the most remote danger. The defeated man had at the very least been imprudent. The murdered man had always been a troublemaker. And if a man's head had been split open after standing up for himself against someone stronger, Don Abbondio could still find some fault in him. Which

was easy enough, since right and wrong are never so neatly divided that each side is either one or the other. He was especially critical of his fellow priests who, at their own risk, took the side of a weak victim against a powerful bully. He considered it begging for trouble, a wish to straighten the legs of dogs. More sternly he called it meddling in worldly affairs, and tarnishing the dignity of the sacred ministry. He railed against such priests, although always one-on-one or to a small group, all the more vehemently when they were known to have no interest in things that regarded him personally. He had a favorite sentence which he always used to conclude his harangues on such matters: No harm comes to an honest man who minds his own business and knows his place.

Dear readers, all twenty-five of you, imagine the impression the meeting with the two bravi must have made on the poor man! The shock of seeing those horrid faces and hearing those horrid words. A threat from a nobleman known to never issue one in vain. A peaceful life that had taken years of study and patience, overthrown in an instant. And a situation that he did not think he could easily escape.

All these thoughts buzzed noisily in the lowered head of Don Abbondio. "If Renzo could be sent on his way with a firm no, then why not? But he'll want to know why, and what can I answer, for the love of heaven? And, and, and he's another headstrong one. If no one bothers him he's a lamb, but as soon as someone crosses him, watch out! And then, and then, so smitten by Lucia, as in love as . . . foolish children. For lack of better things to occupy their minds, they fall in love, want to marry, and can think of nothing else. They don't care about the troubles they create for an honest man! Poor me! Why did those two goons have to plant themselves on my road and pick on me? What's it got to do with me? I'm not the one who wants to get married. Why didn't they go speak with . . . There you have it. Just my luck. The things I should have said come to me a minute too late. If I had only suggested that they convey their message to . . ."

He suddenly realized how wrong it was to regret not having

aided and abetted that wrong, and directed the full brunt of his annoyance at the other person who had robbed him of his peace of mind.

He did not know Don Rodrigo except by sight and reputation, nor had he ever had any dealings with him other than to push his chin into his chest and sweep the tip of his hat against the ground the few times he had encountered him on the street. More than once he had found occasion to defend the nobleman's reputation against men who, under their breath and raising their eyes to heaven, had cursed one of his misdeeds. Hundreds of times he had said that Don Rodrigo was a respectable gentleman. But in this moment he uttered in his heart all the names he had never allowed others to call the man without quickly cutting them off with a "now, now."

His head filled with these vexing thoughts, Don Abbondio reached his house at the far end of the village. Key already in hand, he turned it in the lock, opened the door, entered, and carefully closed the door behind him. Eager to find trusted company, he immediately called out, "Perpetua! Perpetua!" while walking toward the dining room where she would almost certainly be setting the table for supper. Perpetua, as anyone could see, was Don Abbondio's maid. An affectionate, loyal maid who knew how to obey or command, as the occasion warranted, when to put up with the grumblings and whims of the master, and when to make him put up with her own. Her grumbling had grown more frequent by the day, ever since she passed the canonical age of forty, still unmarried, having rejected every suitor, according to her, or never having found a dog who wanted her, according to her friends.

"I'm coming," she replied, setting a flask of Don Abbondio's favorite wine on the table, in the usual place, and biding her time. Yet before she had set foot on the threshold of the parlor, in he came, with a gait so stiff, a look so glum, a face so distraught, that it hardly took her expert eyes to realize at a glance that something extraordinary had happened to him.

"Mercy me! What's wrong, master?"

"Nothing, nothing," Don Abbondio replied, dropping into his chair, gasping for air.

"What do you mean, nothing? You expect me to believe you, with that look on your face? Something terrible has happened!"

"Oh, for the love of heaven! When I say nothing I mean either nothing or something that I can't say."

"That you can't tell even me? The one who looks after you? The one who offers you advice?"

"Come now, be still, and don't put anything else on the table. Fetch me a glass of my wine."

"And you claim that nothing is the matter with you?" said Perpetua, filling the glass and then withholding it, like a reward for the secret that was so slow in coming.

"Give it here, give it here," said Don Abbondio, taking the glass with his shaky hand and emptying it quickly, as if it were medicine.

"So do I have to go asking around to find out what happened to my master?" said Perpetua, standing right in front of him, with her hands on her hips and elbows jutting forward, staring at him, as if to suck the secret from his eyes.

"For the love of heaven! Enough of this talk! Stop making such a fuss! It's a matter of . . . life and death!"

"Life and death!"

"Life and death."

"You know very well that every time you've told me the honest truth, in confidence, I have never . . ."

"Exactly! Like the time . . ."

Perpetua could see that she had struck the wrong chord, so she immediately changed her tone. "Master," she said in a moving voice meant to move his heart, "I have always been fond of you, and if I ask what's wrong, it's because I care, because I'd like to help you, offer you advice, lift your spirits . . ."

Don Abbondio's desire to unburden himself of his painful secret might, in fact, have been as great as Perpetua's desire to know it. So after half-heartedly spurning her renewed and more insistent assaults, after making her swear more than once that she would not

breathe a word of it, finally, amid many hesitations, many gasps of "woe is me," he told her the whole wretched story. When he came to the terrifying name of the instigator, Perpetua had to swear yet another solemn oath. And having uttered the name, Don Abbondio slumped back in his chair with a huge sigh, raised his hands in a gesture of both command and supplication, and said, "For the love of heaven!"

"Up to his old tricks!" exclaimed Perpetua. "That scoundrel! That tyrant! That Godless man!"

"Will you be quiet? Or do you want to ruin me completely?"

"Pshaw! We're alone and no one can hear us. But what will you do, my poor master?"

"So that's it," said Don Abbondio crossly. "That's the fine advice you have to offer me? You ask me what I'll do, as if you were the one in trouble and it was up to me to get you out of it!"

"Well, as a matter of fact I do have my two cents to put in, but then . . ."

"But then? Let's hear it."

"My advice would be this. Everyone says that our archbishop is a holy and brave man who's not afraid of anyone. He's only too happy to put one of these bullies in their place when he can, to support a parish priest. So what I would say, what I do say, is that you write him a nice long letter to inform him how—"

"Will you be still? Will you be quiet? Is this the advice you would give a poor man? If I were shot in the back by a bullet, God help us, would the Archbishop come to extract it from me?"

"Come now, they hardly give bullets away like candy! I won't live to see the day that those dogs bite every time they bark! In my experience the people who know how to show their teeth, to demand respect, are given respect. And since you never want to fight back, everyone around here feels free to come and—"

"Will you please be quiet?"

"I'll be quiet in a minute, but let me tell you one thing. When everyone knows that a man hasn't got the guts to—"

"That's enough! Is this any time to talk such rubbish?"

"That's all I have to say. Think about it tonight but meanwhile try not to make yourself feel worse, and get sick. Have a bite to eat."

"I'll think about it," Don Abbondio replied, grumbling, "I will. There's definitely a lot to think about." He stood up, continuing, "I don't want to eat anything. Nothing at all. What I want is something else. I know that it's up to me to think of something. Ah! Why should this have to happen to me, of all people."

"At least try to drink another drop," Perpetua said, pouring from the bottle, "you know it always settles your stomach."

"It'll take more than that. Much more." As he spoke he took the lamp and, still grumbling, "A bagatelle! For a gentleman of my stature! And what will tomorrow bring?" and other such complaints, began to climb the stairs to his bedroom. At the doorway he turned toward Perpetua, held his finger over his lips, and in a slow, solemn tone whispered, "Sssh! Don't tell a soul, for the love of heaven!" and disappeared.

Chapter 2

They say that the Prince of Condé slept soundly on the eve of the Battle of Rocroi.* Well, in the first place, he was exhausted. In the second, he had already issued all the necessary orders and arranged what had to be done in the morning. Don Abbondio, instead, knew nothing except that the next day would be a day of battle, so he spent much of the night in inner torment. To go ahead and perform the marriage, despite the thugs' warnings and threats, was an alternative he did not wish to contemplate. To confide to Renzo what had happened and try to find some way with him . . . God help us! "Don't breathe a word. And if you do talk . . . *snick*," one of the bravi had said. With the sound of that *snick* echoing in his ears, rather than consider disobeying the order, Don Abbondio regretted even mentioning it to Perpetua.

Run away? To where? And then? So many obstacles! So many things to ponder! With each discarded possibility, the poor man turned over in his bed. The best or rather least bad option apparently was to buy time, by putting Renzo off for as long as possible. He recalled that in only a few days, the period would begin when the Church calendar prohibited weddings.† "If I could keep that

* Louis de Bourbon, the Prince of Condé (1621–86), is considered one of the greatest French generals, celebrated for leading the French army in its defeat of the Spanish at the Fortress of Rocroi in the Ardennes in 1643 during the Thirty Years' War.

† The Catholic Church did not used to allow marriages to be performed during the Advent season preceding Christmas and until the Epiphany (January 6). In 1628, the first Sunday of Advent fell on November 12. The novel begins on November 7 of that same year.

overgrown boy waiting for a few days, I'd have two months' breathing room, and a lot can happen in two months." He weighed the excuses he could muster. While they might have seemed paltry, he kept assuring himself that his authority would make them appear weighty, and that his years of experience would give him a significant advantage over the ignorant youth. "We'll see," he told himself. "He's worried about his sweetheart while I'm worried about saving my skin. The person with the most at stake here is me, not to mention that I'm better informed. 'My dear boy, if you're feeling so hot and bothered, what can I say except that I have no wish to get caught in the middle.'" Having thus settled on a single thought, he was finally able to close his eyes. But what a sleep it was! And what dreams! Populated by bravi, Don Rodrigo, Renzo, footpaths, cliffs, escapes, chases, decrees, and gunshots.

To wake up after a catastrophe and in the middle of a predicament is a bitter moment indeed. The mind, just stirring, reverts to its customary notions of the peaceful former life. But then the thought of the new state of affairs makes a rude entrance, rendered all the more unpleasant by rapid comparison. Having tasted that painful moment, Don Abbondio immediately reviewed the plans he had devised during the night, confirmed and rearranged them, then got out of bed and began to wait for Renzo with a combination of impatience and dread.

Lorenzo, or Renzo, as everyone called him, did not keep Don Abbondio waiting. As soon as the hour seemed right to appear before the priest without being too intrusive, he went, with the joyful exuberance of a twenty-year-old man who on that day is going to marry the girl he loves. He had been orphaned since adolescence, and was a silk-worker by trade: a family legacy, so to speak. It was a trade that years earlier had been quite lucrative, but had lately fallen into decline, although not so much that a skilled worker could not make an honest living. Every day there was less and less work, but the constant exodus of workers, drawn to neighboring states by promises, privileges, and higher wages, ensured that there

were still jobs for those who stayed behind. In addition, Renzo owned a small plot of farmland that others worked, as did he himself when the spinning mill was idle. So you could say that, for his station in life, he was comfortable. And although that year's harvest might have been leaner than the previous year's, and the first signs of a famine were appearing, our young man, from the moment he had laid his eyes on Lucia, had become a good administrator; he had managed to set aside sufficient provisions, and did not have to contend with hunger. Now he appeared before Don Abbondio all dressed up, with colored feathers in his cap, the fine handle of his dagger sticking out of his trouser pocket, and an attitude both festive and cocky, common to even the most mild-mannered men in those days. Don Abbondio's hesitant, mysterious welcome made a singular contrast to the youth's jovial and resolute manner.

"He must have something on his mind," Renzo said to himself. Then, aloud, "I have come, Reverend Father, to know when it would be most convenient for you to meet us in church."

"What day were you thinking?"

"What do you mean, what day? Don't you remember that we set the date for today?"

"Today?" Don Abbondio replied, as if he were hearing it for the first time. "Today? Today? . . . You'll have to be patient. I can't do it today."

"What do you mean you can't do it today? What happened?"

"First of all, you see, I don't feel well."

"I'm sorry to hear it. But this will take so little time and so little effort . . ."

"And then, and then . . ."

"And then what?"

"And then there are complications."

"Complications? What kind of complications?"

"You'd have to be in our shoes to know the obstacles that come up in these matters, all the things that have to be taken into account. My only concern is to get rid of the obstacles, smooth the way, to

do other people's pleasure, and I end up neglecting my duties. I am too good. Then I have to hear criticism, and worse!"

"For the love of heaven, don't keep me guessing. Tell me plain and clear, what's the problem?"

"Do you have any idea how many formalities are involved in doing a marriage properly?"

"How could I not," said Renzo, starting to get upset, "when it's been making me crazy for the past few days! But didn't you take care of everything? Didn't you do everything you were supposed to?"

"Everything, everything, you think it's so simple. I'm the one that's a fool, neglecting my duties to spare other people the trouble. But now . . . enough, I know what I'm talking about. We poor priests are stuck between a rock and a hard place. You're so impatient, but you have my sympathies, my poor lad. And my superiors . . . let me stop right there, some things shouldn't be said. But we're the ones that get caught in the middle."

"Just explain these formalities that have to be taken care of, as you say, and we can take care of them right away."

"Have you ever heard of *impedimenta dirimenta*?"

"Huh?"

"*Error, conditio, votum, cognatio, crimen, cultus disparitas, vis, ordo, ligamen, honestas, si sis affinis,*" Don Abbondio began, counting on his fingertips.*

"Are you making fun of me?" the young man interrupted. "How am I supposed to understand your *latinorum*?"

* *Diriment impediments* are conditions that render a marriage engagement null and void. The ones listed by Don Abbondio are: *error,* an error regarding a person; *conditio,* if one of the spouses is a slave or a bonded servant; *votum,* one of the two spouses has made a religious vow; *cognatio,* the spouses are closely related by blood; *crimen,* a crime such as adultery between the fiancés or murder of the previous spouse of one; *cultus disparitas,* the spouses belong to different religions; *vis et metus,* one of the two parties is being forced into the marriage against his or her will; *ordo,* one spouse is an ordained member of the Church; *ligamen,* one spouse is still bound by a previous valid marriage; *publica honestas,* an earlier marriage that was not consummated; *si sis affinis,* the spouses are related by marriage to a prohibited degree.

"Well, if you don't know things, you should be patient and listen to those that do."

"Enough!"

"Come now, dear Renzo, don't go losing your temper. I'm ready to . . . to do everything I'm supposed to. I . . . I want you to be happy. I'm fond of you. You know, when I think how well you were doing . . . what more did you want? Then you had to come up with this nonsense of getting married!"

"Nonsense, Father?" exploded Renzo, with a face both shocked and irate.

"What I mean to say is, what I mean to say . . . just be patient. I want you to be happy!"

"In other words . . ."

"In other words, my son, it's not my fault. I'm not the one who writes the rules. Before celebrating a matrimony, we are required to make many, many inquiries, to be sure there are no impediments."

"Enough now, tell me once and for all, what impediment has come up?"

"Patience, patience, it's not the kind of thing I can explain off the top of my head. I'm sure there's nothing, at least I hope there isn't. Nevertheless, we have to look into this. The rules are crystal clear. *Antequam matrimonium denunciet . . .*"

"Enough with the Latin, I said."

"But I need to explain . . ."

"Didn't you already take care of this?"

"Not everything that I was supposed to."

"Why not? Why did you tell me everything was ready? Why wait until . . ."

"There you go. Criticizing me for being too good. I did everything I could to speed things along for you, but . . . but now they've come to me . . . enough, I know my reasons."

"And what do you expect me to do?"

"Be patient for a few more days. My dear son, a few days are hardly an eternity. Be patient."

"For how long?"

Don Abbondio thought, "We're almost there," and with an attitude more ceremonious than ever said, "Come now, in fifteen days I'll try . . . I'll manage . . ."

"Fifteen days! That's a good one! Everything you asked for has been done. The day is set, it arrives, and now you tell me to wait fifteen days! Fifteen!" he continued in a louder, more cantankerous voice, extending his arm and punching his fist in the air, and who knows what other mischief that number would have sparked if Don Abbondio had not interrupted him, taken his other hand, and with a shy and solicitous tenderness said, "Come now, don't get upset, for the love of heaven. I'll see, I mean I'll try, in a week . . ."

"And what am I supposed to tell Lucia?"

"That it was my mistake."

"And what will people say?"

"Go ahead and tell everyone that I made a mistake because I was too hasty, out of the goodness of my heart. Blame everything on me. Can I make myself any clearer? Come now, it'll just be a week."

"And there won't be other 'impediments'?"

"When I say . . ."

"So be it. I'll be patient for a week, but I'm warning you, after that, I don't want to hear any more excuses. Until then, my respects." Saying this, he left, making a shorter bow to Don Abbondio than usual, and giving him a look that was more expressive than reverential.

Renzo began walking toward the home of his betrothed, the first time he'd ever gone there reluctantly: Stewing in his anger, the more he thought about that conversation, the stranger it seemed. The chilly and awkward welcome of Don Abbondio, his words both labored and impatient, the two gray eyes that, while he was speaking, kept flitting about, as if they were afraid to encounter the words coming out of his mouth, his pretending to be surprised by a marriage that had been expressly arranged, and above all his constant hinting at some momentous thing without saying what exactly it was. These circumstances as a whole led Renzo to think that Don Abbondio was hiding something from him. He was about to turn

around and demand a clear explanation when he looked up and saw Perpetua a few feet ahead, stepping into a garden not far from the rectory. He called out to her while she was opening the gate, walked briskly to catch up, and detained her at the entrance. Thinking he could dig up something more concrete, he struck up a conversation.

"Good morning, Perpetua. I had hoped that today we'd be sharing our happiness."

"God's will be done, my Renzo."

"Could you do me a favor? The reverend, that rascal, concocted some reasons for the delay that I'm having a hard time figuring out. Maybe you could do a better job of explaining why he can't or won't marry us today?"

"Me? What makes you think that I would know my master's secrets?"

"I knew there was something fishy about this," thought Renzo. And to bring that something to light, he went on. "Come now, Perpetua, we're old friends. Tell me what you know. Give a boy a hand."

"It's a terrible thing to be born poor, my dear Renzo."

"True," he continued, feeling more confirmed in his suspicions. To get to the heart of the matter, he added, "True, but is it a priest's job to mistreat the poor?"

"Listen, Renzo, I can't say anything because . . . I don't know anything. But what I can say is that my master doesn't want to hurt you or anyone else. It's not his fault."

"Whose fault is it, then?" Renzo asked, feigning indifference but with his heart in his throat and his ears pricked.

"When I say I know nothing I mean . . . but in my master's defense I will say one thing, because I hate to hear him accused of wanting to cause anyone harm. The poor man! His only fault is that he is too good. There is still some decency in this world of scoundrels, bullies, and other godless men . . ."

"Bullies? Scoundrels?" thought Renzo. "So he wasn't talking about his superiors." "Come now," he said, struggling to contain his growing agitation, "come now, you can tell me."

"Ah, you want to make me talk, and I can't because . . . I don't

know anything. When I say I don't know anything it's as if I were sworn to silence. Torture me all you want; you still wouldn't get a word out of me. I'm off now. We're both wasting our time here." With that she rushed into the rectory garden and closed the gate behind her. Muttering goodbye, Renzo turned around very slowly so she wouldn't notice where he was going. As soon as she was out of earshot, he quickened his pace and in a heartbeat was back at Don Abbondio's door. He went in and headed straight for the parlor where he'd left the priest. Finding him still there, he went up to him boldly, eyes ablaze.

"What's this?" cried Don Abbondio.

"Tell me the name of that scoundrel!" Renzo demanded, with the voice of a man determined to get an exact answer. "Who's the bully that doesn't want me to marry Lucia?"

"Wha-wha-what?" stuttered the poor man, caught by surprise. In an instant his face turned as weak and pale as a fleck of ash. In the midst of his protests, he leapt up from his chair and ran for the door, but Renzo beat him to it, locked the door, and put the key in his pocket.

"Aha! Now are you ready to talk, Reverend Father? Everyone knows my business except me. Well, I want to know, too, by God. Tell me his name!"

"Renzo, Renzo, for pity's sake, think of what you're doing. Think of your soul."

"What I'm thinking is that I want to know right away, in this instant." As he said this, he placed his hand, unconsciously perhaps, on the handle of the dagger jutting from his pocket.

"Mercy me!" exclaimed Don Abbondio in a faint voice.

"I want to know."

"Who told you . . ."

"Stop beating around the bush. Out with it, and now."

"Do you want to get me killed?"

"I want to know what I have a right to know."

"But if I tell you, I'm dead. Don't I have the right to value my own life?"

"Enough of this. Now talk." Renzo uttered that *talk* with such vehemence and such a menacing face that Don Abbondio did not dare disobey him.

"Promise me, swear to me," he said, "that you won't tell anyone, that you'll never say . . ."

"I promise I'll do something you'll regret if you don't tell me his name right this instant!"

At this latest threat, Don Abbondio, wearing the expression of a man with forceps in his mouth, whimpered, "Don . . ."

"Don . . ." Renzo repeated, as if to help the patient spit out the rest. He was leaning over him now, his ear close to trembling mouth, his arms taut, his fists clenched behind his back.

"Don Rodrigo!" the prisoner blurted out, racing over those few syllables and slurring the consonants, partly out of agitation, partly because—in the effort to reconcile his two fears—he seemed to want to retract that name and make it disappear the moment he was forced to give it up.

"That dog!" Renzo shouted. "How did he do it? What did he say to you to . . ."

"Begging your pa-pardon?" Don Abbondio replied, almost indignantly. After making such a big sacrifice, he felt that Renzo owed him something in return. "Begging your pardon? I'd like to see what you would have done in my position. Me, who's got nothing to do with the matter. Then you wouldn't be entertaining such foolish ideas!" He began to paint a dire picture of the awful encounter. As he spoke, he became more and more aware of the rage building in his body, which, until that moment, had been shrouded in fear. At the same time he noticed that amid the anger and confusion, Renzo was standing still, his head lowered.

Don Abbondio continued freely, "Fine way for you to behave! What a fine courtesy you've paid me! A trick like this against an honest man, against your own priest! In his own home! At a holy place! Nice behavior from you! All to extract the source of my troubles—of your troubles!—from my mouth! I was hiding it from you out of prudence, for your own good. And now that you know?

I'd like to see what you're going to do to me . . . ! For the love of heaven, this is no laughing matter. It's not a question of right or wrong. It's a question of power. And when this morning I gave you some good advice? . . . You flew into a rage. I was wise both for my sake and for yours. How could you? Would you at least unlock the door? Give me the key?"

"Maybe I was wrong," Renzo replied. His tone toward Don Abbondio had softened, but one could still hear his anger at the man he had discovered to be his enemy. "Maybe I was wrong, but place your hand over your heart and imagine what you would have done in my shoes . . ."

As he said this, he dug the key out of his pocket and went to open the door. Don Abbondio followed him, and while Renzo was turning the key in the lock he went up to him and, with a serious, anxious look, raised the first three fingers of his right hand before his eyes, as if to offer some help in return. "Swear . . ."

"Maybe I was wrong, my apologies," Renzo replied, opening the door and preparing to leave.

"Swear," Don Abbondio insisted, grabbing the youth's arm with a trembling hand.

"Maybe I was wrong," Renzo repeated once more, breaking away from him and leaving in a rush, cutting short the dispute, which could have lasted for centuries, not unlike a literary or philosophical debate in which each side did little more than repeat its arguments.

"Perpetua! Perpetua!" Don Abbondio shouted, after calling the fugitive back in vain. Silence. Don Abbondio no longer knew what world he was living in.

More than once people more important than Don Abbondio had found themselves in such annoying predicaments, so uncertain of what action to take that they could think of no better remedy than to take to bed with a fever, a remedy Don Abbondio did not need to go looking for since it offered itself spontaneously. The previous day's scare, the sleepless night, the fear he felt in that moment, and

anxiety over the future had their cumulative effect. Groggy and exhausted, he could not get out of his chair. He started to feel a chill coming over him. Breathing heavily, he checked his fingernails for signs of a fever. From time to time he called out in a shaky, irritable voice, "Perpetua!" Finally she arrived, a large cabbage under her arm, with a no-nonsense look on her face, as if nothing had happened. I'll spare the reader the complaints, the condolences, the accusations, the excuses, the back-and-forth of "It was you," and "No, it wasn't!" all the twists and turns, in other words, of that conversation. Suffice it to say that Don Abbondio ordered Perpetua to lower the bar over the door and not to open it for any reason. If someone knocked, she was to reply from the window that the priest had taken to bed with a fever. He then slowly climbed the stairs, saying at every other step, "Oh, woe is me." Then he really did go to bed, which is where we shall leave him.

Meanwhile Renzo was walking home at a furious pace, without having decided on a course of action, but with an urge to do something strange and terrible. The troublemakers, the tyrants, all those who wrong others in any way, are guilty not only of the wrongs they do but also of the way they pervert the minds of their victims. Renzo was an easygoing youth averse to bloodshed, a pure-hearted boy who hated all intrigues. But in that moment thoughts of murder pulsed through his veins while his mind was dedicated solely to imagining an act of treachery. He wanted to run to Don Rodrigo's house, grab him by the throat, and . . . but he remembered that it was built like a fortress, guarded on the inside by bravi and on the outside by sentries. Only close friends and servants could enter freely, without being scrutinized from head to toe. An unknown laborer—especially Renzo—could never get in without being interrogated . . . On the other hand, he might be known all too well. He then imagined taking out his musket, lying in wait behind a bush in case Don Rodrigo passed by alone. Losing himself in this fantasy with a fierce satisfaction, he imagined hearing one footstep, then another, lifting his head without making a sound, spotting the

villain, leveling his musket, taking aim, firing, seeing him drop and breathe his last, cursing him, and running down the road to the border and safety.

"And Lucia?" No sooner had her name been cast across these sinister fantasies then in swarmed the better thoughts to which Renzo's mind was more accustomed. He remembered his last moments with his parents. He remembered God, the Blessed Mother, and the saints, and he thought back to the consolation he had felt so many times at being untainted by crime, at his horror whenever he heard talk of a murder. And he roused himself from that dream of bloodshed with feelings of shock and remorse, together with a sense of relief that all he had done was imagine it. But to think of Lucia was to think of everything she evoked. So many hopes, so many promises, a future they had dreamed of, which they had thought was secure, and the day they had longed for. And how, with what words, could he deliver such news? And what should he do then? How could he marry her in the face of that evil tyrant's power? At the same time, not so much a suspicion as a troubling shadow crossed his mind. Don Rodrigo's act of outrage could only have been caused by a bestial passion for Lucia. And Lucia? The thought that she might have given him the smallest opportunity, the slightest enticement, was something he could not bear to contemplate for even a moment. But was she aware of it? Could Don Rodrigo have developed his sinister ardor without her knowledge? Might he have gone that far without first approaching her in some way? And Lucia had never said a word to him! To her future husband!

Preoccupied by these thoughts, he walked past his own house, which was in the center of the village, and headed toward Lucia's, which was at the far end of town, or rather, slightly past it. Her cottage had a small courtyard in front enclosed by a low wall that separated it from the street. Renzo entered the courtyard and heard the steady buzzing of many voices coming from a room upstairs. He imagined it must be the female friends and neighbors who had come to escort Lucia to the wedding, and did not want to appear

before that gaggle with the news he wore on his body and on his face. A little girl who was in the courtyard ran toward him crying out, "The groom! The groom!"

"Shhh, Bettina, shh!" said Renzo. "Come here. Go upstairs to Lucia, take her to one side, and whisper into her ear . . . No one should hear or suspect anything . . . Tell her that I need to speak with her, that I'm waiting for her in the downstairs room, and to come right away." The little girl quickly climbed the stairs, happy and proud to have a secret mission to perform.

At that very moment Lucia was coming out of her room, all dressed up by her mother's hands. Her friends teased the bride, demanding that she show herself. She shielded herself, with that slightly aggressive modesty of peasant women, covering her face with her elbow, folding it toward her chest, and knitting her long dark eyebrows, while her mouth opened in a smile. Her dark youthful hair, parted over her forehead on either side of a thin white line, was pulled behind her head and braided in many circles, which were pierced by long silver pins arranged like the rays of a halo, the way peasant women in the Milanese provinces still wear their hair today. Around her neck she had a necklace of garnets alternating with gold filigree beads. She was wearing a floral brocade bodice, with the sleeves separated and tied by pretty ribbons, a short skirt of raw silk with many tiny pleats, scarlet stockings, and embroidered silk slippers. In addition to the special furnishings of her wedding day, Lucia wore the everyday ornament of a modest beauty, enhanced and heightened by the various emotions painted on her face: a joyfulness tempered by a slight restlessness, the placid, rueful sorrow that often appears on the faces of brides and, without marring their beauty, gives them a special character.

Little Bettina pushed her way through the cluster of women. She went up to Lucia and whispered the message into her ear.

"I'll be gone for just a second," Lucia said to the women, and hurried downstairs. At the sight of Renzo's disturbed expression and nervous manner, she asked, "What is it?" not without a sense of dread.

"Lucia," Renzo burst out, "everything is called off for today, and God only knows when we can become man and wife."

"What?" cried Lucia in shock. Renzo briefly related the events of the morning. She listened, filled with anguish, and when she heard Don Rodrigo's name she exclaimed, "Ah"—turning red and trembling—"he went to these lengths!"

"So you knew . . . ?" asked Renzo.

"Yes, unfortunately," Lucia replied, "but I never thought he'd go so far!"

"What did you know?"

"Please don't make me talk right now; don't make me cry. Let me run to get my mother and send the women away. We need to be alone."

As she was leaving, Renzo muttered, "You never told me."

"Oh, Renzo!" Lucia replied, turning toward him for a moment without stopping. Renzo knew that her uttering his name at that moment, in that tone of voice, meant: "How can you doubt that I kept quiet for anything other than the purest and most honest reasons?"

Meanwhile the good Agnese (as Lucia's mother was called), whose suspicion and curiosity had been raised by that whisper in the ear and the disappearance of her daughter, went downstairs to find out what had happened. Her daughter left her alone with Renzo and went back to where the women were gathered. Fixing her appearance and her voice as best she could, she said, "The priest has taken sick, so nothing can be done today." With that, she quickly wished them on their way and went back downstairs.

The women filed out and then scattered through the village to talk about what had just happened. Two or three of them even went all the way to the priest's door, to check and see whether he really was ill. "A high fever!" Perpetua replied from the window. This sad word, reported to the others, cut short the conjectures that were already starting to ferment in their brains or express themselves in mysterious bits and pieces.

Chapter 3

Lucia entered the ground-floor room while a distressed Renzo was relating the news to an equally distressed Agnese. Both of them turned toward the one who knew more than them, and from whom they were awaiting an explanation that could only be painful. Both of them, in their sorrow and with the different types of love they felt for Lucia, could barely contain their equally different annoyance with her at having kept silent about a matter—especially a matter like this. Although Agnese was anxious to hear what her daughter had to say, she could not hold back a few words of reproach. "To keep such a thing from your mother!"

"Now I'll tell you everything," Lucia replied, drying her eyes with her apron.

"Tell me!" shouted the parent. "Tell me!" shouted the groom.

"Mother of God!" Lucia exclaimed. "Who would have believed he would go this far!" Choking back her tears, she related the events of a few days earlier. While she was lingering behind her companions on her way home from the silk-spinning mill, Don Rodrigo had passed by in the company of another man. He tried to detain her with words that, as she put it, were not very nice. Ignoring him, she quickened her step to catch up with her friends. In the meantime she heard the other man guffaw and Don Rodrigo say, "How much do you want to bet?" The next day, the two men were at the same spot, but this time Lucia was surrounded by her companions, her eyes lowered. The second man snickered and Don Rodrigo said, "We'll see, we'll see." "Thank heavens," Lucia continued, "it was the last day at the mill. I immediately told—"

"Told who?" asked Agnese, not without some resentment, eager to hear the name of the confidant Lucia had preferred to herself.

"Padre Cristoforo, in confession, Mother," Lucia replied in a soft apologetic tone. "I told him everything the last time you and I went to the monastery chapel. If you remember, that morning I busied myself, with one thing, then another, so I could linger behind to wait for other people from the village going in that same direction, and walk in their company. Because after that encounter, I was so frightened of the streets . . ."

Upon hearing the revered name of Padre Cristoforo, Agnese simmered down. "You did the right thing," she said, "but why didn't you tell your mother everything?"

Lucia had two good reasons for not telling her. The first, so as not to upset or frighten the good woman over something she could not remedy. The second, to avoid the risk of sending tongues wagging with a story that was best kept safely buried: especially since Lucia had initially hoped that her wedding would put an end to the loathsome persecution. Of these two reasons, however, she only offered the first.

"And you," she added, turning to Renzo with a voice meant to make a friend see the error of his ways, "was I supposed to tell you, too? Well, now you know, unfortunately!"

"What did the padre tell you?" asked Agnese.

"He told me to get married as quickly as we could, and in the meantime to stay home and pray to God. He hoped that once Don Rodrigo stopped seeing me, he'd stop bothering me. It was then that I forced myself," she continued, turning to Renzo again, without raising her eyes to his face, and turning bright red, "that I asked you so boldly to hurry things up, so we could get married before the date we had set. Who knows what you must have thought of me! But I was doing it for our own good, and I had been advised, and I was convinced . . . and this morning, it was the farthest thing from my mind . . ."

Her words were cut short by a violent burst of tears.

"That scoundrel! That monster! That villain!" shouted Renzo,

pacing back and forth in the room, occasionally clutching the handle of his dagger.

"What a predicament, for the love of God!" exclaimed Agnese. The young man stood before Lucia while she wept. He gazed at her with a tenderness both dejected and irate, and said, "I'll make that murderer regret this!"

"No, Renzo, please, for the love of heaven!" Lucia shouted. "No, no! For the love of heaven! The Good Lord also looks out for the poor. How can you expect him to help us if we do wrong?"

"No, no, for the love of heaven!" echoed Agnese.

"Renzo," said Lucia more calmly, radiating hope and determination, "you have a trade and I'm a good worker. Let's go far away, to someplace where he'll never hear of us again."

"And then what, Lucia? We're still not man and wife! Do you think Don Abbondio will let us get married somewhere else? A man like him? If we were already married, then we could . . ."

Lucia started crying again and all three remained in silence, with a dejection that stood in stark contrast to their festive attire.

"Listen to what I have to say, children," Agnese said after a few moments had passed. "I came into the world before you, and I know a thing or two about it. There's no need to be so upset. Things are never as bad as they seem. To us poor folk things always seem more entangled than they really are because we don't know which end to grab. But sometimes an opinion, a word or two from an educated man . . . Here's what I want to say. Take my advice, Renzo. Go to Lecco and look up Professor Argle-Bargle—but don't call him that, for the love of heaven, it's a nickname. Look up Professor Argle-Bargle and tell him . . . now what's his name? Oh, darn! I don't know his real name. But everyone calls him that. Well, go looking for a tall, thin, bald man with a red nose and a raspberry birthmark on his cheek."

"I know him by sight," Renzo said.

"Good," Agnese continued. "He's a prince among men. I've seen more than one person who was in a stickier situation than a fly in honey, not knowing where to turn, and after just one hour alone

with Professor Argle-Bargle (be careful not to call him that!), I'm telling you, they were able to laugh about it. Take with you those four capons—poor things—whose necks I was supposed to wring for the Sunday banquet, and bring them to him. Because you should never go empty-handed to see a gentleman. Tell him everything that happened and see what he has to say, off the top of his head, things that would never occur to us in a year."

Renzo embraced this proposal enthusiastically. Lucia approved and Agnese, proud of her solution, took the poor animals from the coop, one at a time, squeezed their eight legs together as if she was making a bouquet of flowers, tied them together with string, and handed them to Renzo. After giving and receiving words of encouragement, he left by the back door so that none of the boys would see him. Otherwise they would have run after him calling, "The groom! The groom!" Crossing the fields, or rather "the places," as the locals call them, he went down the footpaths, growing more agitated as he reflected on his misfortune, and pondering what to say to Professor Argle-Bargle. I'll leave it to the reader to imagine what the journey must have been like for those poor animals, tied together and carried upside down by their claws, by a man who, in the grips of so many passions, had a gesture to accompany each thought agitating his mind. One moment he was punching the air in a rage, the next he was raising his arms in despair, and the next waving them menacingly, all the while shaking the birds violently and jiggling their four dangling heads up and down. Through it all, they kept pecking at one another, as is too often the case with fellows in misfortune.

Once he reached Lecco, he asked for the lawyer's residence. It was pointed out to him and he headed in that direction. At the lawyer's front door he was overcome by the shyness typical of the unlettered poor in the company of a learned gentleman, and he forgot all the speeches he had prepared. After a glance at the capons, however, he took heart. Entering the kitchen, he asked the maid if he could speak to the lawyer. She laid her eyes on the animals and, as if accustomed to such offerings, grabbed hold of one end while

Renzo pulled on the other, so the lawyer would see that he had not come empty-handed. The master of the house appeared right when the woman said, "Give 'em here and go in." Renzo made a deep bow. The lawyer welcomed him kindly saying, "Come, my son," and ushered him into his study.

It was a large room in which portraits of the twelve Caesars were arranged on three of the walls. The fourth was occupied by a large shelf of dusty old books. In the middle of the room was a desk piled high with depositions, petitions, claims, and decrees, surrounded by three or four chairs. An armchair to one side had a high square back and corners topped by two wooden horn-shaped ornaments. It was upholstered in leather with large bosses, some of which had fallen off long ago, leaving places where the unfastened edges curled up. The lawyer was in his dressing gown, that is to say, attired in a threadbare garment he had worn many years earlier, when he used to go to Milan to argue important cases before the court. He closed the door and encouraged the young man to speak, saying, "Tell me about your case."

"I wish to speak with you in confidence."

"Well, here I am," the lawyer replied, "speak," and sat down in his chair. Renzo, standing before the desk with one hand on the crown of his hat, while turning it with the other, began his prepared speech. "I would like to know from you, a learned man . . ."

"Just the facts," the lawyer interrupted.

"You'll have to excuse me. We poor folk don't know how to speak properly. So what I'd like to know . . ."

"Damn it! You're all the same! Rather than tell me the facts, you want to ask questions, since you've already cooked up some scheme or other."

"I'm sorry, sir. I'd like to know whether it's against the law to threaten a priest for refusing to perform a marriage."

"Now I see," said the lawyer to himself, although he really hadn't. "Now I see." He instantly turned serious, but a seriousness mixed with compassion and concern. He pursed his lips, emitting an inarticulate sound that hinted at a sentiment which was clearly ex-

pressed by his first words. "A serious case, my son, a case that is indeed contemplated by the law. You were right to come to me. It is a clear-cut case, provided for in a hundred decrees, and . . . to be precise, in a decree issued last year, by the present governor. Now I'll show it to you, so we can get to the heart of the matter."

As he spoke, he stood up from his chair and stuck his hands into that jumble of papers, rearranging them from bottom to top, as if sifting through grain in a barrel. "Where is it, now? Come out, come out, wherever you are! You need to have so many things at hand! But it must be here. It's an important decree! Ah! Here it is!" He plucked out a piece of paper, spread it out, glanced at the date, and adopting a more serious expression, shouted, "The fifteenth of October 1627! Right I was! From last year. A fresh decree—these are the ones we have to worry about. Do you know how to read, my son?"

"A little, sir."

"Well, then. Look over my shoulder and you'll see." Waving the decree in the air, he started to read aloud, racing through some passages in a mumble, and pausing on others more deliberately, with great expression, if needed:

"Whereas, by the decree published by order of the Duke of Feria on the fourteenth of December 1620, and confirmed by the Most Illustrious and Excellent Gonzalo Fernández de Córdoba, etcetera, *urgent and severe measures were taken against the oppressions, coercions, and acts of tyranny that some dare to commit against His Majesty's devoted vassals, and nevertheless, the frequency of the violations, and their maliciousness,* etcetera, *have increased to such an extent as to force His Excellency,* etcetera. *Therefore, after consultation with the Senate and the Council,* etcetera, *he has decided upon the publication of the present decree.*

"And, starting with acts of tyranny, experience shows that many, both in the cities and in the countryside . . . Did you hear that? . . . *of this State, in a tyrannical manner, do intimidate and oppress the vulnerable in various ways, such as forcing people to sell or to lease properties* . . . etcetera—

"Where are you? Ah, here you are. Listen to this:

"*—and to perform or not perform marriages—*"

"My situation exactly," said Renzo.

"Listen, listen, there's more, and then we'll see the penalties."

"*To testify or not, to leave one's place of residence,* etcetera, *force some to pay a debt, another to leave a certain personage alone, another to purchase his flour at a specific granary*—This part has nothing to do with us. Ah, here we are—*force a priest not to perform his duties, or to do things he should not.* Eh?"

"It sounds like this decree was tailor-made for me."

"Eh? It really does. Listen, listen: *All these and other such criminal acts, whether committed by feudal lords, noblemen, burghers, farmers, or commoners*— No one's left out: It's like the Last Judgment! Now you'll hear the penalties.

"All these and other such criminal actions, although already prohibited, the determination has nevertheless been reached that stricter measures are required, and His Excellency, by the present decree, without exception, etcetera, *orders and commands that anyone who commits in any manner whatsoever the above-mentioned crimes or similar ones, shall by all the judges of this State be subjected to monetary and corporal punishment, ranging from banishment, to the galleys, and even death*—a mere bagatelle!—*at the discretion of His Excellency, or of the Senate, depending on the gravity of the cases, persons, and circumstances. And this un-re-mis-si-bly and with all severity,* etcetera. That's quite a mouthful, isn't it? And look at the signatures: *Gonzalo Fernández de Córdoba,* and farther down, *Platonus,* and even farther down, *Vidit Ferrer.* They didn't miss a thing."

As the lawyer read, Renzo followed slowly with his eyes, trying to figure out the exact meaning and to identify the sacrosanct words that seemed to help his case. The lawyer, amazed to see his new client more attentive than terrified, said to himself, "Is he a hardened criminal?"

"Aha!" he said aloud. "I see that you've cut off your forelock. You were smart to do so. But since you are placing yourself in my hands, there was no need. The case is serious, but you don't know what I'm capable of, given the chance."

To understand the lawyer's remark, you need to know or recall that in those days, bravi and hooligans of every sort used to sport a

forelock that they pulled over their face, like a visor, when they assaulted someone, in circumstances where they needed a disguise, and the deed required both strength and caution. The decrees did not fail to remark on this fashion. *His Excellency* [the Marquis de la Hinojosa] *commands that anyone who wears his hair so long that it covers his forehead down to his eyebrows, or wears a braid in front of or behind his ears, will incur the penalty of three hundred* scudi, *and in the event of inability to pay, to three years in the galleys, for the first offense, and for the second, an even greater monetary or corporal punishment, at the discretion of His Excellency.*

Allowing, however, that in the event of baldness or other reasonable cause such as a birthmark or scar, such men may, for the sake of their decorum and health, wear their hair as long as necessary to cover such defects and no more, being careful not to exceed duty and pure necessity, in order (not) to incur the penalties imposed on other transgressors.

Barbers are likewise ordered, under penalty of one hundred scudi or three yanks of the corda to be administered in public, and even greater corporal punishment, at the discretion as above, not to leave those whose hair they cut with the above-mentioned braids, forelocks, curls, or hair that is longer than customary, either in the front, on the sides, or behind the ears, but that it be the same length, as above, except in cases of baldness or other defects, as above.

The forelock was almost an element of one's armor, a badge worn by bravi and other troublemakers, who as a result were commonly known as *ciuffi* or "forelocks." This term has remained and is still alive in dialect with a more innocuous meaning. Every single one of my Milanese readers, perhaps, will remember having been called as a child a *ciuffo* or *ciuffetto* by parents, a teacher, a neighborhood friend, or a servant.

"The truth is that, being a poor boy," Renzo replied, "I've never worn a forelock in my life."

"We're getting nowhere," the lawyer replied, shaking his head with a smile that was both mischievous and impatient, "if you don't trust me, we're getting nowhere. Let me tell you, son, that he who lies to his lawyer is a fool who'll tell the truth to the judge. You have to speak plainly to a lawyer, who can then proceed to make things

more complicated. If you want me to help you, you have to tell me everything, from A to Z, with your heart in hand, the way you would your confessor. You have to give me the name of the person who hired you to commit the crime. Of course it'll be a person of some standing, in which case I'll go to him to pay my respects. I won't let him know that you told me he hired you. Trust me. I'll tell him I'm coming to request his protection for a poor maligned youth. And I'll make the necessary arrangements with him to settle the matter to our mutual satisfaction. And by saving himself, you see, he'll also be saving you. Now if this escapade turns out to have been of your own doing, I still won't drop you. I've gotten other clients out of worse predicaments . . . So long as you didn't attack a person of standing, let me be clear, I promise to get you out of this mess. It'll cost you, I'm sure you realize. You have to tell me the name of the injured party. And depending on his condition, status, and temperament, we'll decide whether to restrain him with some protection or find a way to bring him up on criminal charges, to scare him off. Because if you know how to manipulate the decrees, no one's guilty and no one's innocent. As for the priest, he'll keep his mouth shut if he knows what's good for him. And if he's hard-headed, there's a remedy for that, too. There's a way out of every predicament, but it takes a man like me. And your case is serious, I'm telling you, very serious. The decrees speak plainly: If this matter were to be decided in the courts, just between us, they'd lock you up and throw away the key. I'm speaking to you as a friend. You have to pay for your escapades. If you want to come out of this with your freedom, money, and reputation intact, you're going to have to trust someone who cares about you, and do everything I say."

While the lawyer spouted these words, Renzo stared at him in amazement, like a simpleton in a public square gazing at a magician who fills his mouth with straw and then extracts an interminable stream of ribbons. When he realized what the lawyer was trying to say, however, and his misunderstanding of the situation, he snipped those ribbons, saying, "Oh, sir, what have you understood? You've got it backward. I didn't threaten anyone. I don't do things like that.

Ask anyone in my village. They'll tell you I've never had any trouble with the law. I'm the victim here, and I've come to you to find out how justice can be done. And I'm glad that I saw that decree."

"Damn it!" the lawyer exclaimed, his eyes popping out. "Look at the mess you've made. You people are all the same. Aren't you people capable of saying things plainly?"

"I'm sorry, but you didn't give me the time. Now I'll tell you what happened. You see, today I was supposed to get married." Renzo's voice filled with emotion. "I was supposed to marry a girl I've been seeing since this summer. And today, as I was saying, was the day set by the priest, and everything had been arranged. Then the priest started digging up excuses . . . Well, to get to the point, I made him speak clearly, as was only right, and he admitted that he'd been forbidden, at the risk of his life, to perform this marriage. That tyrant Don Rodrigo . . ."

"Get out!" the attorney cut him off in an instant. "Get out!" he said, knitting his brows, wrinkling his red nose, and grimacing. "The nerve of you coming here to annoy me with all your nonsense! You can talk that way with one another, since you don't know how to weigh your words! But don't go talking nonsense with an honest man who knows their true worth! Get out! You don't know what you're talking about. I don't waste my time with children. I don't want to hear any more of your confabulations!"

"I swear . . ."

"Get out, I'm telling you. What do you expect me to do with your oaths? I want nothing to do with this. I wash my hands of it!" And he walked away, rubbing his hands together as if he really was washing them. "Learn to speak. And don't go trying to ambush an honest man with such surprises."

"But listen, please listen," Renzo repeated in vain. The lawyer, still shouting, pushed him out of his study with both hands. And when they were on the threshold, he opened the door, called the maid, and told her, "Give this man back what he brought. I want nothing from him!"

In all the time she'd worked there, the woman had never received

an order like that. But it was said so forcefully that she did not hesitate to obey. Taking the four birds, she handed them back to Renzo with a look of compassionate disdain, as if to say: "You must have done something really awful." Renzo wanted to make his apologies, but the lawyer was adamant. More dismayed and frustrated than ever, the young man had to return home with the rejected victims to tell the women what a fat lot of help his expedition had been.

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In Renzo's absence, after sadly removing their festive attire and putting on their ordinary clothes, the women resumed their deliberations. Lucia sobbed and Agnese sighed. After her mother spoke at length about the great results they could expect from the lawyer's consultation, Lucia said they had to try to help themselves in every way possible. Padre Cristoforo was a man who would not only offer advice: He would also take action when it came to helping the poor, and it would be a good idea to tell him what had happened. "Certainly," said Agnese, and they both set about looking for a way. The monastery was about two miles away, but on that day, neither of them felt brave enough to go there, nor would any sensible person have advised them to do so.

As they were weighing their alternatives, a knock came on the front door together with a soft but distinctive "*Deo gratias.*" Wondering who it might be, Lucia ran to open the door and in came a lay Capuchin mendicant, making a short familiar bow, and carrying over his left shoulder a bag that he kept twisted shut with his hands.

"Oh, Fra Galdino!" the two women said.

"May the Lord be with you," he replied, "I have come to beg for walnuts."

"Go and fetch some walnuts for the friars," Agnese said. Lucia stood up and stepped toward the other room. Before leaving, however, she waited for a moment behind the back of Fra Galdino, who remained standing in the same position. Placing her finger over her lips, she gave her mother a look, pleading for secrecy with tenderness and a certain authority.

The friar, observing Agnese as if from a distance, asked, "What

about the wedding? Wasn't it supposed to be today? In town I noticed a certain hubbub, as if something had happened. What was it?"

"The Reverend Father took sick and we had to postpone," she answered hastily. If Lucia hadn't given her the signal, Agnese would probably have given a different answer. To change the subject, she asked, "And how is the collection going?"

"Not very well, my good woman. This is all I've managed to get." He removed the bag from his shoulders and weighed it in his hands. "This is everything. I had to knock on ten doors to gather this abundance."

"Well, the harvests have been poor, Fra Galdino, and when you have to ration bread, it's hard to be generous with anything else."

"And what is the solution, my good woman, to bring back the days of plenty? Charity. Do you know the story of the miracle of the walnuts? It happened many years ago, at our monastery in Romagna."

"No, I don't. Please tell me about it."

"Well, you should know that in that monastery there used to be a Padre Macario, a living saint. One winter day, he was out walking along a path through a field that belonged to one of our benefactors, another good man. Padre Macario saw the owner near one of his big walnut trees. Four peasants with spades had started to dig up the tree, to set its roots out to dry. 'What are you doing to that poor tree?' Padre Macario asked.

"'Ah, Padre, it's been years since it's given me any walnuts. I'm going to chop it up for firewood.'

"'Leave it alone,' the friar said. 'This year it will produce more nuts than leaves.'

"The benefactor, knowing what kind of a man he was talking to, immediately ordered the workers to cover the roots back up with dirt. He called out to the friar, who had continued on his way, 'Padre Macario, I'll donate half of the harvest to the monastery.'

"Word of the prophecy soon spread and everyone was eager to

see the walnut tree. When spring arrived it filled with an abundance of blossoms, and over time, an abundance of nuts. Our good benefactor did not have the satisfaction of gathering them himself: Before the harvest, he departed this world to receive the rewards for his charity. But the miracle was even greater, as you will hear. That good man had left behind a son of an altogether different disposition. When the harvest arrived, the friar went to collect the half that had been promised to the monastery, but the son claimed he knew nothing of it, and went on to say—the gall!—that he didn't realize that the Capuchins knew how to harvest walnuts. Do you know what happened then? One day—wait till you hear this—the scalawag had invited over a group of friends of his same ilk and, in the midst of their revelry, was telling the story of the walnuts and making fun of the monks. These miscreants wanted to see the big pile of walnuts so he took them to the granary. But guess what? He opened the door, headed for the corner where the pile had been deposited, and just as he was saying, 'Look,' he took a look himself, and saw . . . a big pile of dried walnut leaves! That'll teach him! And rather than lose, the monastery gained. Because after word of this miracle got out, the walnut collection went even better thanks to other benefactors, one of whom, feeling sorry for the poor mendicant friar, donated a donkey to the monastery to help carry the loot home. And so much oil was made from the nuts that there was enough for all the poor, each according to need. For we are like the sea, taking in water from every side and then feeding it back to the rivers."

In that moment Lucia reappeared with her apron so full of walnuts that she struggled to hold it up by the corners, even with her arms outstretched. Fra Galdino removed his bag, placed it on the floor, and opened it up to receive this kind offering; Agnese made a stern, disapproving face at Lucia for her generosity. But Lucia looked back at her as if to say: "I'll explain later." Fra Galdino gushed with words of praise, good wishes, promises, and gratitude. Putting his bag back over his shoulder, he started to leave. But

Lucia called him back, saying, "I need you to do a favor for me. Could you tell Padre Cristoforo that I need to speak with him? Ask him if he couldn't pay us the courtesy of coming to see us right away, since we can't get to the church ourselves."

"That's all? Within the hour Padre Cristoforo will have heard your request."

"I'm counting on you."

"Have no doubts." At that he left, a little heavier and a lot happier than when he had arrived.

That a poor girl could summon Padre Cristoforo with such confidence, and that the mendicant friar would agree to convey the message without any indication of surprise or difficulty, should not lead anyone to think that Cristoforo was some ordinary friar. On the contrary, he was a man of great authority in his order and in the surrounding region. But such was the vocation of the Capuchins that nothing seemed too low or too high for them. A Capuchin was accustomed to everything: tending the sick and being tended to by the powerful, entering palaces and huts with the same humble yet confident demeanor, in the same house being alternately a nobody and someone essential to all decision-making, seeking charity for everything and providing it to anyone who requested it at the monastery. As he walked down the road he could just as easily run into a prince who would reverently kiss the tip of his cordon as he would a gang of delinquents acting as if they were fighting, only to turn around and splatter his beard with mud. In those days the word *friar* was uttered with both the greatest respect and the harshest scorn. The Capuchins, perhaps more than any other order, aroused opposite feelings and experienced opposite fortunes. Since they had no possessions, wore a particularly strange habit, and more openly professed their humility, they were more exposed to the veneration and slander that such qualities can invite depending on the different moods and different thoughts of men.

Once Fra Galdino had left, Agnese exclaimed, "All those walnuts! After a harvest like this!"

"Forgive me, Mother," Lucia replied, "but if we had made the

same donation as everyone else, Fra Galdino would have continued on his rounds for who knows how long before his shoulder bag was full. God knows when he would have made it back to the monastery. And with all the other gossip he would have heard and shared by then, God knows if he would have remembered my message."

"Good thinking. Anything that bears fruit is an act of charity," said Agnese, who despite her faults was a kindhearted woman always ready, as the saying goes, to walk through fire for her only daughter, in whom she had invested all her aspirations.

In the middle of all this Renzo arrived, wearing an expression that was both angry and humiliated. He flung the capons on a table—and this was the last sad chapter for those poor animals that day.

"Nice advice you gave me!" he told Agnese. "And such a nice man that Professor Argle-Bargle. A man who really cares for the poor!" and he related his consultation with the lawyer. The woman, dismayed by how badly things had turned out, still wanted to prove that her advice had been good, and that Renzo must have mishandled the situation, but Lucia interrupted the argument, announcing that she hoped she had found a better solution. Renzo welcomed this new source of hope, as would anyone in the grips of trouble or misfortune. "But if the padre can't fix this," he added, "then I will, one way or the other."

The women urged him to be calm, patient, and prudent. "Tomorrow," Lucia said, "Padre Cristoforo will surely come, and you'll see for yourself that he'll find the kind of solution that we common folk cannot even imagine."

"I hope so," said Renzo, "but no matter what, I'll get what's mine by right, even if I have to fight for it. For in the end, there is justice in this world."

Amid the sad talk and the comings and goings herein described, the day had gone by and the sky was growing dark.

"Good night," said Lucia sadly to Renzo, who could not seem to make himself leave.

"Good night," replied Renzo, even more sadly.

"A guardian angel will help us," Lucia replied, "be prudent and resign yourself."

Her mother added more advice along the same lines, and the groom left at last, his heart in turmoil. He kept repeating to himself the same strange words. "In the end there is justice in this world." For a man overcome by grief truly does not know what he is saying.

Chapter 4

The sun had not yet fully breached the horizon when Padre Cristoforo left his monastery in Pescarenico to make his way up to the cottage where he was awaited. Pescarenico is a hamlet on the left bank of the Adda (or "the lake," as we prefer to call it), not far from the bridge; a cluster of houses, inhabited for the most part by fishermen, decorated here and there by trammels and nets hung out to dry. The monastery was located (and the remains of the building still are) on the road from Lecco to Bergamo, opposite the entrance to the hamlet. The sky was crystal clear. As the sun slowly rose from behind the mountain, you could see its light shining on the summits across the river and making its way down the slopes and into the valley, as if it were rapidly unfurling. An autumn breeze lifted the withered leaves off the branches of the mulberry trees and deposited them a few feet away. In the vineyards to the right and the left, the foliage shimmered in various shades of red on the still unpruned shoots. And the freshly tilled soil, brown and distinctive, stood out in the fields of bleached stubble glistening with dew.

It was a happy scene, but every human figure that appeared cast a pall on Padre Cristoforo's gaze and his thoughts. Here and there he would come across beggars, ragged and skinny, seasoned practitioners or driven by need to hold out their hands. In silence they passed by Padre Cristoforo, staring at him piteously. Although they had nothing to hope for from him, since a Capuchin never placed his fingers on money, they would bow in gratitude for the charity they had received or were on their way to seeking at the monastery. The sight of laborers scattered in the fields was even more heart-

breaking. Some were sowing seed parsimoniously, sparely, begrudgingly, as if they were risking something they cared about deeply. Others struggled to wield their spades, turning over the soil halfheartedly. A scrawny girl, leading an emaciated cow by a rope while it grazed, took a look around and then stooped down quickly to steal some herbs to feed her family, having learned from hunger that men, too, can subsist on grass. At every step of the way, these sights cast a deeper pall over the monk, who was already walking with a sad foreboding in his heart that he was about to hear of a new adversity.

But why was he so concerned about Lucia? And why, as soon as he heard, had he acted so promptly, as if he had been summoned by the Father Provincial? And who was this Padre Cristoforo? All of these questions deserve an answer.

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Padre Cristoforo of *** was a man closer to the age of sixty than fifty. His head, bald except for a small crown of hair that circled his scalp, in compliance with the Capuchin Rule, looked up every now and then in a movement that revealed something proud and restless; and then, in a humble reflex, immediately looked down. A long white beard covered his cheeks and chin, and brought out the prominent features of the upper part of his face, to which a long habit of abstinence had lent gravity rather than removed passion. He had two sunken eyes that were usually lowered to the ground, but at times would flash in a sudden spark of liveliness, like two skittish horses being led by a coachman whom they knew through experience they could not best, but would still try to buck every now and then, and pay for it immediately with a hard tug on their bit.

Padre Cristoforo had not always been a friar, nor had he always been a Cristoforo: His Christian name was Lodovico. He was the son of a merchant from *** (these asterisks reflect the discretion of my anonymous author) who, in his later years, finding himself well-to-do, and having only one son, had renounced commerce and dedicated himself to living the life of a gentleman.

In his newfound leisure, the former merchant's body was slowly penetrated by shame over all the time he had spent making a living in the world. Obsessed by this thought, he studied every possible way to make people forget that he had once had to work for a living. And he wished that he, too, could forget. But the shop, the bolts of fabric, the ledger, and the yardstick constantly reappeared in his memory like the ghost of Banquo to Macbeth, even amid the pomp of banquets and the smiles of sycophants. And you could not even begin to describe how carefully the poor guests had to avoid any word that might seem to allude to their host's former station in life.

One day, for example, toward the end of a banquet, when the merriment was so lively and so genuine that you couldn't tell who was having more fun, the horde that was emptying the plates or the host who had set them out, he started teasing one of the guests, the world's heartiest eater, with amiable condescension. The guest, responding in turn, with all the candor of a child and not a hint of malice, answered, "Eh! I'm going to act like the shopkeeper who pretends he hasn't heard." The second the word came out of his mouth he cringed. With a hesitant expression, he looked at his host, whose face had clouded over. Both men wished the word could be taken back, but it was too late. The other guests thought, each to himself, how to smooth over the small scandal and change the subject. But they kept their thoughts to themselves, and in that silence the gaffe became even more conspicuous. Each of them avoided looking at the others. Each of them felt that all the others were thinking what they themselves wanted to hide. All joy, for that day, had fled the room. And the imprudent, or to be more precise, the unlucky man was never invited back.

Lodovico's father thus spent his last years in constant anxiety, always fearing that he would be mocked, never stopping to think that selling is no more ridiculous than buying, and that the profession he had become so ashamed of was one that he had exercised for many years, in public, and without remorse. He raised his son as if he were a noble, according to the standards of the time, and to the

extent allowed by law and custom. He hired tutors for him in the arts of letters and chivalry. And he died, leaving behind a young and wealthy heir.

Lodovico had developed aristocratic habits, and the flatterers among whom he'd grown up had accustomed him to being treated with great deference. But when he wanted to mingle with the town's leading citizens, he met a very different reception. And he saw that, if he wanted to be in their circle, he would have to enroll in a new school of patience and submission, willing to be looked down upon, willing to swallow new humiliations. This lifestyle did not accord with Lodovico's upbringing or his character. He took his distance from them, irritated. But then he regretted that distance, since he felt that they should really have been his companions. If only they could have been more agreeable. With this mixture of eagerness and resentment, unable to frequent them as friends yet wanting to associate with them in some fashion, he began competing with the town's aristocrats in ostentation and grandiosity, thus purchasing wholesale their hostility, envy, and ridicule. Over time his temperament, both honest and violent, led him into more serious rivalries. He felt an instinctive, sincere horror at injustice and bullying, a feeling heightened by the status of the main perpetrators: the very men he so deeply resented. As a way of acting on all these passions at the same time, he sided with the weaker, losing party, put bullies in their place, stuck his nose into other people's quarrels, and sought quarrels of his own. As a result, he gradually took on the role of protector of the oppressed and avenger of wrongs. It was a heavy responsibility, and of course poor Lodovico ended up with enemies, obligations, and concerns.

In addition to the wars outside, he was constantly tormented by inner conflicts, since to win his battles (not to mention the ones he lost), he had to adopt forms of deception and violence that his conscience could not condone. He had to retain a number of *bravacci.* For the sake of his own security and his need for the most vigorous assistance, he had to choose the most daring and vile companions, out of love for justice, and was forced to live with scoundrels. It

bothered him so much that on more than one occasion, when he was either upset by an unfortunate outcome or anxious about an imminent danger, annoyed to be constantly on his guard, disgusted by the company he kept, worried about the future and the dwindling of his fortune with each passing day, through both good deeds and bad, he began to fantasize about becoming a friar, the most common expedient in those days for escaping trouble. But what might have remained a lifelong daydream became a genuine resolution because of an accident, the most serious that had ever befallen him.

One day he was walking down a street of his city, accompanied by two bravi and a certain Cristoforo, who in the past had worked as an apprentice to his father but, after the shop was closed, became steward of Lodovico's household. He was a man of about fifty who had been fond of Lodovico since his youth, and present at his birth. Between wages and gifts, Lodovico had provided him not only with a livelihood but also with the means to support and raise a large family. In the distance Lodovico spotted a certain gentleman, an arrogant bully by profession. Although the man had never spoken with Lodovico, he was his cordial enemy, a sentiment heartily reciprocated, since one of the benefits of this world is for complete strangers to hate and be hated in turn. This man, escorted by four bravi, walked straight ahead, with a haughty gait, head held high, and mouth twisted into a proud, scornful expression. Both men walked close to the wall, but Lodovico (pay attention) had the wall to his right. According to custom, that gave him the right not to break away from the wall to let another person pass (there was a law for that, too), which mattered a great deal in those days. The other man claimed, on the contrary, that, as a nobleman, he had the right of way, and that it was up to Lodovico to move to the middle of the road, in deference to a different custom. For here, as in many other instances, there were two opposing customs, and no decision had been rendered on which of the two should prevail. This created the opportunity for a war to break out every time an obstinate man ran into someone else of the same temperament. The two approached

each other, hugging the wall, like moving figures on a bas-relief. Once they were face-to-face, the aristocrat, with an imperious air, sized up Lodovico and in a corresponding tone of voice told him, "Move."

"You move," replied Lodovico. "I have the right of way."

"With men of your class, the right is always mine."

"Only if the arrogance of your class were the law for mine." The bravi of both men came to a halt, each behind his master, glowering at one another, hands on their daggers, ready for battle. Onlookers gathered around, keeping their distance but watching the event unfold. Their presence made the rivals even more unwilling to back down.

"To the middle of the road, you lowlife tradesman, or I'll teach you once and for all how to behave with a gentleman!"

"Liar! Who are you calling a lowlife?"

"You're the liar, for calling me a liar!" was the rejoinder prescribed by the chivalric code. "If you were a gentleman, like me," the gentleman added, "I would show you with my sword and cape that the liar is you."

"Ah, a good excuse for you not to back up your insults with deeds."

"Throw this rogue in the mud," said the gentleman, turning to his men.

"We'll see about that," replied Lodovico, immediately taking a step back and placing his hand on his sword.

"You impudent dog!" cried the other, unsheathing his own weapon. "I'll shatter my sword after it's been dirtied with your filthy blood."

At this they lunged at each other. The men on both sides rushed in to defend their masters. The fight was uneven, both in number, and because Lodovico was more intent on fending off blows and disarming the enemy than on killing him. But his opponent wanted him dead at all costs. Lodovico had already been stabbed in his left arm by a bravo, and grazed on one cheek. His adversary charged forward to finish him off, when Cristoforo, seeing his master in ex-

treme danger, came at the gentleman with his dagger. The man, turning his full rage on the steward, ran him through with his sword. At the sight, Lodovico snapped and thrust his sword into the stomach of the murderer, who fell, dying at almost the same time as poor Cristoforo. The gentleman's bravi, bruised and bloodied and realizing that the battle was lost, took to their heels. Lodovico's men, who were also battered and bruised, seeing no one left to fight and not wanting to get caught in the mob of people rushing toward them, took off in another direction. And Lodovico found himself alone, in the middle of the crowd, with the two dying men at his feet.

"What happened?" "There's one." "There's two." "A hole right through the stomach!" "Who got killed?" "That tyrant." "Holy Mother of God, what mayhem!" "Seek and you shall find." "You get what you deserve in the end." "He's done for, too." "What a blow!" "This must be serious." "And that other poor soul!" "Good Lord, what a sight!" "Save him, save him." "He's not long for this world, either." "Look at the state he's in! Bleeding everywhere!" "Run, run. Don't let yourself get caught!"

These words, which could be heard above the din of the crowd, expressed the general consensus. And with that advice came help. The fight had taken place near a Capuchin church: sanctuary, as everyone knows, that cannot be breached by the police or by the complex of things and people known as the justice system. The wounded murderer was taken or rather carried there, almost unconscious, by the crowd. The friars received him from the hands of the people, who entrusted him to them saying, "He's a good man who killed an arrogant scoundrel. It was self-defense. He was forced into it."

Lodovico had never, until that moment, taken a life. Although murder was so common in those days that everyone's ears were used to hearing about it, and eyes to seeing it, to watch one man die for him and another because of him came as a new and unspeakable shock, awakening unfamiliar feelings. The fall of his enemy, the alteration in his face, which in a moment passed from fury and men-

ace to defeat and the solemn stillness of death, was a sight that transformed the murderer's heart in an instant. Having been carried inside the monastery, Lodovico had no idea where he was or what he was doing there. When he came to his senses, he found himself in a bed in the infirmary, in the hands of the Brother Surgeon (the Capuchins normally had one in each monastery), who was wrapping in medicated gauze and bandages the two wounds he had received in the clash. A padre assigned to tend to the dying, a service he had often had to provide on the road, was called to the place of combat. A few minutes later he returned, entered the infirmary, and approached the bed where Lodovico was lying. "Be consoled," he said, "at least Cristoforo died well. He told me to ask for your forgiveness and to offer you his own." These words revived poor Lodovico, and awakened in him even more sharply and vividly the confused feelings crowding into his heart: grief for his friend, consternation and remorse over the fatal blow inflicted by his own hand, and anguished compassion for the man he had killed. "And the other man?" he asked the friar anxiously.

"He was already dead when I got there." As they spoke, the doors of the monastery bustled with curious onlookers, until the police dispersed the crowd and stationed themselves at a distance from the gate, but close enough for no one to leave unobserved. A brother of the dead man, two of his cousins, and an elderly uncle arrived, armed from head to toe, with a large retinue of bravi, and started to circle the crowd, glaring scornfully and threateningly at the onlookers, who did not dare to say, "He got what he deserved," although it was written on their faces.

As soon as Lodovico could gather his thoughts, he called for a Brother Confessor and asked him to seek out Cristoforo's widow, and on his behalf to beg forgiveness for having been the cause—unwillingly, of course—of her desolation, and at the same time to assure her that he would take care of the family. Reflecting next on his own affairs, he could feel rekindling inside, more vividly and earnestly than ever before, the idea of becoming a friar. He felt as if God himself had set him on this path and given him a sign by lead-

ing him to a monastery at this juncture in life. His decision was made. He asked to see the Father Guardian, to whom he expressed his desire. In reply he was told to be wary of hasty decisions, but that if he persisted in his intentions, he would not be turned down. Then, in the presence of a notary, Lodovico dictated that his remaining possessions (which were still a hefty patrimony) were to be donated to Cristoforo's family: a sum to his widow, as if he were establishing a second dowry, and the rest to the eight children whom Cristoforo had left behind.

Lodovico's decision could not have been more opportune for his hosts, who were in quite a predicament on his account. The idea of sending him away from the monastery, thereby exposing him to justice—namely, the revenge of his enemies—was not even contemplated. It would have been tantamount to renouncing the privileges of the Order, discrediting the monastery among the people, drawing the condemnation of every Capuchin in the universe for allowing a violation of their common rights, and rankling the ecclesiastical authorities, who considered themselves the guardians of those rights. On the other hand, the family of the murdered man, which was powerful in its own right and through its associates, was intent on revenge, and would treat as an enemy anyone who tried to get in the way. History does not tell us that they mourned the dead man, or that his relatives wept over him. It only says that they were all in a frenzy to get their hands on the murderer, dead or alive. But now the murderer, by donning the Capuchin habit, had settled everything. In a sense, he was making amends, doing penance, acknowledging his guilt implicitly, and withdrawing from every challenge. In other words, he was an enemy laying down his arms. The dead man's relatives could believe and protest all they wanted that he had become a friar out of desperation and fear of their wrath. At the same time, to reduce a man to giving up his earthly possessions, shaving his head, walking barefoot, sleeping on a burlap sack, and living on alms should seem like a fitting punishment to even the most pompous injured party.

The Father Guardian presented himself, humble yet self-

assured, to the brother of the deceased. After countless protests of his respect for the illustrious house, and his desire to appease it as best he could, he spoke of Lodovico's repentance and decision, implying diplomatically that the house should consider them sufficient, and intimating, more subtly and artfully, that, like it or not, this was the way things would be. The brother flew into a rage, which the Capuchin allowed to blow over, saying repeatedly, "You have every right to be upset." The brother hinted that, in one way or another, his family would have its satisfaction. The Capuchin, whatever he might have thought, did not disagree. In the end the brother requested, or rather imposed, one condition: that his brother's killer leave the city immediately. The guardian, who had already decided on this course of action, told him that it would be done, letting the other man believe, if he wished, that it was an act of obedience. And so the matter was concluded. The family was happy, since it had emerged with its honor intact. The friars were happy, since they had saved a man and their privileges without making any enemies. The lovers of chivalry were happy, since they saw a commendable conclusion to the affair. The people were happy, since they saw a beloved man being kept out of danger, at the same time as they admired a conversion. And finally, happiest of all, amid his grief, was our Lodovico, who had embarked on a life of expiation and servitude that could, if not undo the crime, then at least atone for it, and relieve him of the intolerable pangs of remorse. For a moment he was beset by the suspicion that he was only acting out of fear. But he was immediately consoled by the thought that even an unjust opinion was a form of punishment and a means of atonement. So at the age of thirty, he donned the tunic. And having to give up his own name, according to custom, and take another, he chose one that reminded him every minute of the day of the reason for his atonement: He took the name Fra Cristoforo.

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As soon as the Investiture Ceremony was over, the guardian instructed him that he would be leaving the next day to do his novitiate in ***, sixty miles away. The novice made a deep bow and

requested one favor. "Padre," he said, "before leaving this city, where I have killed a man, where I am leaving behind a family that has been cruelly injured, allow me to at least make amends for my deed. Allow me to at least show my regret that I am unable to remedy the harm I have done by asking forgiveness of the dead man's brother, and alleviating, if God should bless my intention, the rage from his heart." The guardian felt that this proposal, in addition to being innately good, would also help to further reconcile the family with the monastery. He went at once to see the brother and convey Fra Cristoforo's request. At such an unexpected proposal, the brother felt both a sense of surprise and a renewed indignation, though not without some complacency. After giving it a moment's thought, he said, "Come by tomorrow," and set a time. The guardian returned to the monastery, bringing the novice the desired consent.

The nobleman immediately realized that the more solemn and resounding the apology, the more it would elevate his status among his relatives and the public. And it would add a nice page (to say it with modern eloquence) to the family history. He quickly notified all of his relatives that, at noon the next day, they were to grace him with their presence (as they used to say back then), on the occasion of an apology to be made to the family as a whole. At noon, the palace was bustling with nobles of every age and sex. It was a swirl, a blend of wide capes, tall feathers, dangling swords, a soft rustling of starched collars, embroidered cassocks weaving in and out. The vestibules, courtyard, and road teemed with servants, pages, bravi, and onlookers. Fra Cristoforo observed the pageantry, guessed the reason behind it, and felt a slight unease. After a moment, however, he said to himself, "It's only right. I killed him in public, in the presence of many of his enemies. That was an affront. This is reparations." So with his eyes lowered and the Father Guardian by his side, he passed through the gates to the house and crossed the courtyard, surrounded by a crowd that looked him up and down with a most unceremonious curiosity. He climbed the stairs and, surrounded by a second crowd of nobles that parted to let him

through, followed by a hundred stares, he came into the presence of the master of the house. The latter, flanked by his closest relatives, was standing in the center of the room, his eyes on the ground and his chin in the air, gripping the hilt of his sword with his left hand, while pressing to his chest the lapel of his cape with his right.

Sometimes the face and demeanor of a man have such a spontaneous expression, almost an effusion of the inner self, that a crowd of spectators will reach a single judgment of that self. The face and demeanor of Fra Cristoforo made it clear to the onlookers that he had not become a friar or arrived at that humiliation out of fear of man, a consideration that started to appease everyone. When he saw the injured party, he quickened his step, knelt at the man's feet, crossed his arms over his chest, and bowing his shaven head, uttered these words: "I am the murderer of your brother. God knows that I would pay with my own blood to bring him back to you, but since I can do nothing more than make my futile and belated apologies, I beg you to accept them out of love of God."

All eyes were on the novice and the man to whom he was speaking. All ears were listening. When Fra Cristoforo fell silent, the room was filled with a murmuring of compassion and respect for him. The nobleman, who had been standing there with an attitude of forced cordiality and compressed rage, was shaken by these words. Leaning toward the kneeling man, he said, in an altered voice, "Stand up, sir. The crime . . . or rather, the deed . . . but the habit you wear . . . not only that, but you yourself . . . Please, Padre, stand up . . . My brother . . . I cannot deny . . . was a gentleman . . . a man . . . who could be impetuous . . . a bit of a temper. But God's will be done. Let us speak no more of this . . . But, Padre, you must not stay in this position." Taking him by the arm, he helped him up.

Fra Cristoforo, standing but with his head still bowed, replied, "Can I therefore hope for your forgiveness? And if I receive forgiveness from you, from whom should I not expect it? Oh, if I could only hear from your mouth the word 'forgiveness.'"

"Forgiveness?" the man asked. "You no longer need it. But as you

wish, of course, of course, I forgive you from my heart, and all of us . . ."

"All of us! All of us!" shouted the onlookers in unison. The friar's face lit up in joyful appreciation, yet beneath it one could still detect a humble, deep contrition for his sin, which human forgiveness could not repair. The nobleman, overcome by that appearance, and surrendering to the general commotion, threw his arms around his neck to give and receive the kiss of peace. Cries of "Bravo! Well done!" broke out from each corner of the hall. Everyone crowded around the priest. The servants arrived with a great abundance of refreshments. The nobleman approached Cristoforo, who indicated that the time had come for him to take his leave, and said, "Padre, please have something to eat. Allow me this proof of your friendship," and he started to serve him before anyone else. But Cristoforo, taking a step back with polite resistance, said, "Such things are no longer for me. But let it never be said that I refused your gifts. I am about to depart on a journey. If you would be so kind as to have a piece of bread brought to me, so that I may say I have benefited from your charity, eaten your bread, and received a token of your forgiveness."

Deeply moved, the nobleman ordered that it be done. A waiter immediately appeared, in full livery, carrying the bread on a silver platter, and presented it to the friar. Taking it and expressing his appreciation, Fra Cristoforo placed it in his bag. He then asked permission to take his leave. Embracing the master of the house one more time, as well as anyone nearby who managed to steal a moment, he broke away with difficulty. He had to fight his way through the vestibule, through the crush of servants and even bravi, who kissed the hem, the cord, and the hood of his habit. He found himself in the street, carried as if in triumph, and accompanied by a crowd of the common people all the way to the gates of the city. And from there he left, beginning his journey on foot to the place of his novitiate.

The brother of the slain man and his relatives, who on that day

had expected to savor the bitter joy of pride, found themselves filled instead with the serene joy of forgiveness and goodwill. The company lingered on for a while longer, with unusual good humor and cordiality, in discussions that none of them had expected on their way there. Rather than satisfaction exacted, outrages avenged, and challenges won, they sang the novice's praises and spoke of meekness and reconciliation. The man who would have told the story for the fiftieth time of how his father, Count Muzio, on that famous occasion, had put in his place the Marquis Stanislao, a notorious braggart, spoke instead of the penance and the amazing patience of Fra Simone, who had died many years earlier. After the company had left, the master, still filled with emotion, marveled at what he had heard and what he had said. "That devil!" he muttered between his teeth (we have to be careful to transcribe his exact words). "That devil! If he'd stayed on his knees a minute longer, I would have been the one apologizing to him for his killing my brother."

Our story points out that, from that day forth, the nobleman was a little less impulsive, and a lot more affable.

Fra Cristoforo walked away with a sense of consolation he had not felt since the fateful day for which he would atone the rest of his life. The novice's vow of silence came easily to him, lost as he was in thoughts of the labors, sacrifice, and humiliation he would suffer to pay for his sin. When he stopped at the home of a benefactor at dinnertime, he ate almost voraciously the bread of forgiveness he had received. But he saved one piece and placed it back in his bag, to keep as a perpetual reminder.

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I have no intention of telling the story of his life in the cloister. I will only say that, in carrying out, always willingly and scrupulously, his regularly assigned duties to preach and to minister to the dying, he never missed a chance to perform two others that he had imposed on himself: to settle disputes and to protect the oppressed. In this vocation there were unconscious traces of his old lifestyle and vestiges of his warrior spirit that the humiliations and self-

mortification of monastic life had not completely extinguished. His language was usually humble and measured, but when justice or truth were at stake, his old temper would suddenly flare, seconded and modified by the solemn emphasis he had gained through preaching, lending a unique character to his language. His whole demeanor, like his appearance, betrayed a long war between a fiery, resentful disposition and the opposite desire, which usually prevailed, always alert and guided by higher motives and inspiration. A fellow friar and friend, who knew him well, once compared him to words that are overly colorful in their natural form, which some people, even the educated, utter when passion overflows, but in a fractured form, with a couple of letters changed for the sake of propriety. Words that, despite this disguise, maintain their original energy.

If a poor unknown girl, in a dire situation like Lucia's, were to ask for Padre Cristoforo's help, he would come running. Since it was Lucia herself, he came all the more quickly, for he knew and admired her innocence, was already worried about the dangers facing her, which he had learned of from her confession, and felt a holy indignation over the depraved harassment to which she had been subjected. In addition to which, having advised her, as the lesser of evils, to say nothing and to keep quiet, he now feared that his advice might have had an unintentionally dire effect. His innate propensity toward charity was increased, in this case, by the scrupulous anxiety that often torments good people.

But while I've been telling you the story of Padre Cristoforo, he has in the meantime arrived and appeared at the door. And the women, abandoning the squeaky spinning wheel they had been turning, stood up and said in a single voice, "Padre Cristoforo. God bless you for coming!"

Chapter 5

This same Padre Cristoforo stood still on the doorstep. With one look at the women, he realized that his forebodings had not been wrong. With the inquiring tone that anticipates bad news, while lifting his beard with a slight tilt of his head, he asked, "What is it, child?" Lucia's reply was to burst into tears. Her mother started to apologize for having been so bold as to . . . but the friar came forward. Sitting down on the three-legged stool, he waved away all formalities, saying to Lucia, "Be calm, poor girl." And to Agnese, "Tell me what happened." As the good woman told the sad tale as best she could, the priest turned a thousand different colors, one moment lifting his eyes to the heavens, the other tapping his feet. Once the story had ended, he covered his face with his hands and exclaimed, "Lord have mercy! For how long . . ." Without finishing his sentence, he turned to the women again. "You poor things," he said, "God is testing you. Poor Lucia!"

"You won't abandon us, Father?" she sobbed.

"Abandon you?" he replied. "If I did, then how could I find the courage to ask God for anything for myself? You, in this condition? You, whom God has placed in my care? Don't lose heart. He will come to your aid. He sees everything. He can use even a nobody like me to humble a . . . Come, let's see what we can do."

At this, he placed his left elbow on his knee and rested his forehead on the palm of his hand. With his right hand he cupped his beard and his chin, as if to keep a firm grip on his every impulse. But the more he thought about it, the more he realized how urgent

and complicated the case was, and how uncertain and perilous the solutions. "Make Don Abbondio feel ashamed, and show him that he has failed in his duties? But shame and duty mean nothing to him if he's afraid. Frighten him? The only thing he's afraid of is a gun. Inform the Cardinal-Archbishop of everything and invoke his authority? That would take time. And meanwhile? And then? Even if the girl were to get married, would that stop this man? Who knows how far he would go? . . . Resist him? But how? "Ah," thought the priest in anguish, "if I could only get the brothers from here and Milan to help me! But this matter doesn't involve the whole community. They'd leave me on my own. He acts like he's a friend to the monastery, passing himself off as a supporter of the Capuchins. And his bravi have sought sanctuary with us more than once. I'd be on my own. They'd accuse me of being a hothead, a liar, a troublemaker. What's more, if I act at the wrong time, I could make things worse for the poor girl."

Weighing the pros and cons of this side or that, he thought it best to confront Don Rodrigo himself and try to dissuade him from his sinister designs, through pleading, fear of the afterlife, and fear of this life, too, if possible. At worst, he would see more clearly just how set the man was on his evil pursuit, learn more about his intentions, and come away the wiser for it.

As Padre Cristoforo turned things over in his mind, Renzo, who, understandably, couldn't keep away from the cottage, appeared at the door. Seeing the priest absorbed in thought, and the women signaling not to disturb him, he stood there in silence. Looking up to tell the women his plan, the priest noticed Renzo and greeted him with a familiar affection made more intense by compassion.

"Did they tell you . . . Padre?" asked Renzo in a pained voice.

"Unfortunately. That is why I'm here."

"What do you have to say about that scoundrel?"

"What does it matter? He's not here to listen. What good would my words do? What I want to tell you, dear Renzo, is to place your faith in God, for He will not abandon you."

"Bless you for those words!" exclaimed the youth. "You're not one of those who always blames the poor! But the pastor, and that lawyer of lost causes . . ."

"Dwelling on it will only upset you needlessly. I'm just a poor friar, but I'll repeat what I just told the women. For what little I can do, I will not abandon you."

"You're not like my friends of the world! They're all talk! You should have heard the promises they used to make in the good old days. They said they'd shed blood for me. They'd defend me against the devil himself. If I had an enemy . . . all I had to do was give the signal, and he'd be eating his words. Now they can't run away from me fast enough." Looking up, he noticed that the friar's face had clouded over and realized, too late, that some things were better left unsaid. Hoping to take back his words, he started hemming and hawing. "What I was trying to say . . . what I meant . . . you see, I was trying to say . . ."

"What were you trying to say? Tell me! Here you were, ready to ruin my work even before I'd begun! It's a good thing we stopped you in time. You placed your faith in your friends? . . . What friends! . . . They couldn't have helped you if they had wanted to! And you were trying to lose the one friend who can and will help you! Don't you realize that God is the friend of the afflicted who place their faith in him? Don't you know that the weak can never win by showing their teeth? Even if . . ." He grabbed Renzo's arm. His face, without any loss of authority, took on a look of solemn remorse. His eyes were lowered, his voice, slow and cavernous. "Even if . . . it comes at a terrible price! Renzo! Will you place your trust in me? . . . In me, a mere mortal, an insignificant friar? Will you place your trust in God?"

"Yes, I will," answered Renzo, "He is the true Lord."

"So promise me you won't confront or provoke anyone, and let me handle this."

"I promise."

Lucia let out a deep breath, as if a burden had been lifted, and Agnese said, "There's a good boy."

"Listen, my children," Padre Cristoforo continued, "I'll go and have a talk with this man today. If God touches his heart and lends power to my words, fine. If not, He'll help us find another solution. In the meantime, I want you to stay here. Keep to yourselves, remain indoors, avoid gossip, and stay out of sight. I'll be back this evening or, at the latest, tomorrow." At this he cut short all the thank-yous and bless yous and left. He headed for the monastery, arriving in time to go to the choir and sing the midday offices, have lunch, and set out immediately on the road to the lair of the beast he was seeking to tame.

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The palace of Don Rodrigo rose, isolated and severe, like a fortress atop one of the hills scattered along and rising above the lakeshore. The anonymous author (who should have simply told us the name of the place) indicates that it was located about three miles uphill from the young couple's village and four miles from the monastery. At the foot of the hill, on the south side facing the lake, there was a cluster of huts inhabited by Don Rodrigo's peasants, like the miniature capital of his miniature kingdom. A passing glance was enough to grasp the livelihoods and conditions of the villagers. Through the occasional open door a quick look at the ground-floor rooms was greeted by a jumble of rifles, muskets, hoes, rakes, straw hats, hairnets, and powder horns hanging from the wall. The people lingering about were brawny, gruff ruffians with big forelocks tucked into a hairnet worn behind their heads. Toothless old men who, at the least provocation, were ready to gnash their gums. Women with mannish faces and muscular arms that served to aid the tongue whenever words failed. Even the expressions and movements of the children playing in the street implied something insolent and provocative.

Fra Cristoforo crossed the village, ascended a winding path, and came to a small clearing in front of the palace. The door was closed, a sign that the master was dining and did not wish to be disturbed. Although the few small windows facing the street were covered by rotting and dilapidated shutters, they were fortified by thick iron

bars. The ground-floor windows were so high up that a man standing on another's shoulders could barely reach the windowsill. A heavy silence reigned, and a passerby might have thought the house was abandoned were it not for four creatures, two living and two dead, located symmetrically, outside, indicating that the place was inhabited. Two large vultures, wings spread wide and heads dangling—one already plucked and rotting in the open air, the other still whole and feathered—were nailed to either side of the door. Two bravi were lying on benches to the right and the left, standing guard and waiting to be called in to enjoy leftovers from the master's table. The friar stopped in his tracks, as if he was prepared to wait. But one of the bravi stood up and said, "Padre, please, go on ahead. We do not keep Capuchins waiting here. We're friends of the monastery. There have been times in my life when I was in a tight spot. If the monastery had closed the door on me, I'd have been done for." At this he banged the door knocker twice. The sound was greeted from inside by the baying and yelping of mastiffs and puppies. A few seconds later an elderly servant arrived, grumbling. As soon as he saw the priest, however, he made a deep bow. He shushed the animals with his gestures and his voice, ushered him into a narrow courtyard, and closed the door behind them. He then accompanied him to a reception room, and, looking at him with an air of surprise and respect, said, "Aren't you . . . Padre Cristoforo of Pescarenico?"

"One and the same."

"You . . . here?"

"As you can see, my good man."

"You're here to do good, no doubt. To do good," he continued, muttering to himself and setting off again, "we could all use some good." After crossing two or three other unlit rooms, they reached the doorway to the dining room. There was a loud clatter of forks and knives, glasses and plates, and of discordant voices trying to talk over one another. The friar wanted to stay back, and was arguing with the servant from behind the door to let him wait in a cor-

ner of the house until dinner was over, when the door suddenly opened. A certain Count Attilio (a cousin of the master, whom I have already mentioned, though not by name) was seated directly across from him. Seeing a shaven head and a tunic, and noticing the good friar's attempts at modesty, he called out, "Wait, wait. Don't run away, reverend Father. Come in. Come in." Don Rodrigo, without guessing the exact reason for the visit, still had an inkling of its purpose and would gladly have forgone it. But since the carefree Attilio had been so loud, there was no turning back. So he, too, said, "Come in, Padre, come in." The friar came forward, bowed to the master of the house, and gestured with both hands in response to the salutations of the other guests.

When an honest man confronts an evildoer, many but not all of us like to imagine the former with his head held high, a steady gaze, chest out, and tongue untied. In reality, however, such a posture requires a variety of circumstances that rarely coincide. So you shouldn't be surprised that Fra Cristoforo—with his clear conscience, firm belief in the rightness of his cause, and mixed feelings of both repugnance and pity for Don Rodrigo—stood before him with an air of intimidation and deference. There sat Don Rodrigo, at the head of the table, in his own home, his own domain, surrounded by friends, flattery, and many signs of his power, with a look on his face that would squelch any request—not to mention advice, correction, or rebuke—before it could be uttered. To his right was Count Attilio, his cousin and, needless to say, his partner in debauchery and brutality, who had come up from Milan for a few days in the country. To his left, on the opposite side of the table, sat the Mayor, whose deference was tempered by a smug, superior attitude, the same man who in theory should have been demanding justice for Renzo Tramaglino, and making Don Rodrigo obey the laws we have read earlier. Facing the Mayor, with a demeanor of the purest, most abject deference, was our lawyer, Professor Argle-Bargle, in a black cloak, his nose even redder than usual. Opposite the two cousins were two anonymous guests. The

only thing our manuscript says about them is that all they did was eat, nod their heads, laugh, and agree with everything one guest might say that was not contradicted by another.

"Give the padre a seat," Don Rodrigo ordered. A servant appeared with a chair, on which Padre Cristoforo sat, while making his apologies for having come at such an inopportune time. "I would much rather speak with you alone, at your convenience, on an important matter," he whispered to Don Rodrigo in a soft voice.

"Fine, fine, we'll talk," the man answered, "but in the meantime bring the padre something to drink." The priest tried to decline, but Don Rodrigo, raising his voice above the rising din, bellowed, "No, by God, you won't do me this discourtesy. Let it never be said that a Capuchin left this house without tasting my wine, nor an insolent creditor without a switch from my forest." His words sparked general laughter, and briefly interrupted a heated argument among the guests. A servant carrying a tray with a small flask of wine and a long-stemmed glass presented it to the friar. Not wishing to refuse such a pressing invitation from the man whose favor he hoped to gain, he poured himself a glass without making a fuss and started to sip it slowly.

"You'll have to do better than quote Tasso, Reverend Mayor. He argues the opposite of what you're saying."* Count Attilio began shouting again. "That erudite poet, that great man, knew chivalry inside out. That's why before Argante's messenger delivered his challenge to the Christian knights, he had him request permission from the pious Godfrey of Bouillon to . . ."

"But that," replied the Mayor, just as vociferously, "was superfluous, a poetic flourish, since by his nature and by the law of nations, *jure gentium,* the messenger cannot be touched. Not to mention the

* Torquato Tasso (1544–95) wrote the hugely popular chivalric epic *Gerusalemme liberata* [*Jerusalem Delivered*] (1581), relating the conquest of Jerusalem during the First Crusade. In Book Six, the pagan hero Argante sends his messenger to the leader of the Christian knights, Godfrey of Bouillon, to challenge Tancredi to a duel.

old proverb, 'Don't shoot the messenger.' And proverbs, my dear count, contain the wisdom of the human race. And since the messenger said nothing on his own behalf, but only presented a written challenge . . ."

"When are you going to get it through your head that the messenger was an insolent fool, who didn't know the first thing about . . ."

"With your permission, gentlemen," Don Rodrigo broke in, not wanting the argument to get out of hand, "let's put the question to Padre Cristoforo, and let him be the judge."

"Fine with me," said Count Attilio, who agreed that having a Capuchin rule on a question of chivalry was the most diplomatic solution. The Mayor, who was more riled up by the argument, struggled to keep quiet, and made a face as if to say, "Don't be ridiculous."

"Well, if I've understood correctly," the priest began, "I'm hardly an expert in these matters."

"Your professions of modesty don't fool me," said Don Rodrigo. "Come now. We all know you weren't born with the cowl over your head. You used to be a man of the world yourself. Let's get on with it. Here is the question."

"The fact of the matter . . ." Count Attilio tried to talk over him.

"Let me tell the story, cousin," Don Rodrigo cut in, "since I'm the impartial one. A Spanish knight sends a challenge to a Milanese knight. His messenger, finding that the knight isn't home, delivers the challenge to the man's brother, who reads it, and, by way of a reply, gives the messenger a few whacks with a stick. At issue here . . ."

"Well done and well deserved!" cried Count Attilio. "His reply was truly inspired!"

"Like hell it was," chimed in the Mayor. "Beating a messenger! It's sacrilegious! I'm sure you'll agree, Padre, that a true knight would never do such a thing."

"Yes, he would!" shouted the Count, "Take it from me. If anyone knows the rules of chivalry it's me. Now if he'd used his fists, it

would have been another matter. But a stick doesn't get your hands dirty. What I can't understand is why you care so much about the skin of a lowborn messenger?"

"Who said anything about his skin, my dear Count? You're putting words in my mouth. I was talking about his person, not his back. My main concern is the *jure gentium.* Tell me, please, whether the fetials—the priestly diplomats whom the ancient Romans sent to issue their challenges—requested permission to deliver a message? Can you name a single writer who mentions the beating of a fetial?"

"What have the ancient Romans got to do with anything? They were very casual, and in matters of this sort, they were backward, very backward. But according to the rules of modern chivalry—the only true chivalry—I say and I argue that a messenger who dares to hand a gentleman a challenge without first requesting permission is insolent, wrong, doubly-wrong, and punishable, doubly-punishable . . ."

"See if you can answer this syllogism."

"No, no, no."

"Yes, yes, yes. To strike an unarmed man is treachery. *Atqui* he's a messenger *de quo* unarmed, *ergo* . . ."

"Wait a minute, Signor Mayor."

"What do you mean, wait?"

"I mean wait. Listen to yourself. You say it's treachery to stab or shoot someone in the back. There are other instances that I could mention, too . . . but let's stick to the question. I'll grant you that such acts are generally considered treacherous. But to smack a low-life a few times? It'd be nice to tell him first, 'Now I'm going to beat you,' as if you were saying, '*En garde!*' to a gentleman. And you, esteemed counselor, rather than giggling your agreement, why not use your honeyed tongue to help me persuade this gentleman?"

"Me?" Professor Argle-Bargle stammered. "I was just enjoying this erudite dispute, and I thank the lucky stars that gave rise to such a gracious war of wits. But it's not for me to pass sentence. Your most honorable self has already designated a judge . . . the padre . . ."

"True," said Don Rodrigo, "but how can you expect the judge to speak when the litigants refuse to shut up!"

"Not another word from me," said the Count. The Mayor sealed his lips and raised his hand in a gesture of resignation.

"Thank heaven for small favors! Please proceed, Padre," said Don Rodrigo with mock solemnity.

"I've already made my excuses. As I said, I'm no expert," replied Fra Cristoforo, returning his glass to a servant.

"That's a poor excuse," the two cousins piped up, "we await your sentence."

"In that case," the friar continued, "in my humble opinion, there should be no challenges, no messengers, and no beatings."

The guests looked at one another in disbelief.

"That's rich," said Count Attilio. "Forgive me, Padre, but you couldn't be more wrong. You obviously don't know the ways of the world."

"Him?" said Don Rodrigo. "Didn't you hear what I said before, dear Cousin? He knows the world as well as you or I. Admit it, Padre, you've sown your wild oats, haven't you?"

Rather than rise to this loving question, the friar had a private word with himself: "They're trying to get under your skin. But remember, you're not here for your own sake. Ignore anything directed only at you."

"That may well be," said the cousin, "but the friar . . . what did you say his name is?"

"Padre Cristoforo," a chorus of voices replied.

"But Padre Cristoforo, most revered lord, you'd turn the world upside down with your maxims. No challenges! No beatings! No questions of honor? Impunity for every lowlife? Luckily what you propose is impossible."

"Your turn, Counselor," exclaimed Don Rodrigo, hoping to steer the dispute away from the first two contenders. "Your turn. We can always count on you to take both sides. Let's see you take Fra Cristoforo's defense!"

"To be honest," Argle-Bargle replied, brandishing his fork in the

air and addressing the priest, "I can't understand how Padre Cristoforo, who is both the perfect friar and the perfect man of the world, didn't realize that his sentence, which from the pulpit might sound fine, excellent, and fair, is without merit—I say this with all due respect—in a dispute about chivalry. But he knows better than I that to everything there is a season. And this time, I think, he was pulling our leg to avoid having to pass sentence."

How does one respond to arguments based on wisdom so ancient yet so new? By saying nothing. Which is exactly what our friar did. But Don Rodrigo, to cut the discussion short, introduced another subject. "By the way," he said, "I've heard that in Milan there are rumors of a peace treaty."

The reader will know that in those years a war was being waged over the succession to the Duchy of Mantua, which upon the death of Vincenzo Gonzaga, who had left no legitimate heir, came into the possession of his next of kin, the Duke of Nevers.* Louis XIII of France, or rather his chief minister, Cardinal Richelieu, supported Nevers, a naturalized Frenchman who was very devoted to the French King. Philip IV of Spain, or rather his prime minister, the Count of Olivares (commonly known as the Count-Duke), did not want him in Mantua for the same reason, and declared war on Nevers. And since Mantua was an imperial fief, the two parties pressured the emperor, Ferdinand II, through negotiations, petitions, and threats: the Cardinal, for the emperor to grant investiture to the new duke; the Count-Duke, for him to deny it, and indeed to help drive Nevers from Italy.

"I'm inclined to believe," Count Attilio went on, "that we may indeed be close to a peace treaty. I've heard reports . . ."

"Don't believe everything you hear," the Mayor interrupted. "Even in this pocket of the world, I'm in a position to know what's

* As Manzoni relates, the death in 1627 of Duke Vincenzo II of Mantua, the last in the male line of the Gonzaga family, led to a war of succession involving primarily France, Spain, and Austria, seat of the Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick II, who was already embroiled in the Thirty Years' War (1618–48).

happening. The Spanish commander of the Fort, who out of the goodness of his heart seems to like me, is the son of one of the Count-Duke's protégés, so he knows everything that is going on . . ."

"Every day in Milan I just happen to rub shoulders with some very important people. And I have it on good authority that the Pope, who is very interested in keeping the peace, has proposed . . ."

"As well he should. Everything in its place. His Holiness is doing his duty. A pope should always act as a mediator between Christian princes. But the Count-Duke has his policy, and . . ."

"And, and, and. Do you have any idea, my dear sir, what the emperor is thinking at this moment? Do you really believe that Mantua is the only place on earth? He has many other things on his mind. Do you have any idea, for instance, whether the Emperor can trust his prince of Valdistano or Vallistai, or whatever his name is, and whether . . ."

"The correct pronunciation in the German language," the Mayor interrupted, once again, "is Vaglіensteino, as I have heard it pronounced many times by the Spanish commander.* But rest assured that . . ."

"You would teach me?" the Count retorted, but Don Rodrigo gave him a look as if to intimate that, for his sake, he should stop arguing. The Count fell silent and the Mayor, like a ship broken free from a sandbank, continued full sail down his loquacious stream. "Vaglіensteino doesn't worry me, since the Count-Duke is keeping an eye on everyone and everything. And if he does get out of hand, the Count-Duke will set him straight, by fair means or foul. He has his eyes everywhere, I tell you, and his arm is long. If he has determined, great statesman that he is, that the Duke of Nevers will not cement his claim on Mantua, then you can bet he won't. And Cardinal Riciliù will fall flat on his face. What a laugh, for the Cardinal

* Valdistano, Vallistai, and Vaglіensteino are all local distortions of the surname of Albrecht von Wallenstein (1583–1634), born to a noble Czech family of Bohemia, who raised a large army that he placed at the service of Emperor Ferdinand II during the Thirty Years' War. The Mayor also Italianizes the name of Cardinal Richelieu.

to think that he can get the better of a man like the Count-Duke of Olivares. Honestly, I'd love to be reborn two-hundred years from now to hear what posterity has to say about his claims. It's not enough to want it. You have to have brains. And no one in the world has the brains of the Count-Duke. The Count-Duke, with all due respect," the Mayor continued, the wind still in his sails and amazed to find nary an obstacle in sight, "is an old fox, who can hide his tracks from anyone. When he nods to the right, you can be sure he'll go left. No one can ever claim that they know his plans. Not even those who execute them, who have to write the reports. I know what I'm talking about, because my good friend the commander is so kind as to confide in me. On the other hand, the Count-Duke knows exactly what's cooking in the kettles of all the other courts. And no sooner have all those big-shot statesmen (there are plenty of sly ones, you have to admit) come up with a plan than the Count-Duke has it already figured out, with that big brain of his, with those secret ways of his, with those tentacles everywhere. Poor Cardinal Riciliù, no matter how hard he tries—sniffing around, sweating, plotting—every time he sets an ambush, he ends up getting ambushed himself by the Count-Duke."*

Heaven knows when the Mayor would have made landfall if Don Rodrigo, prompted also by the look on his cousin's face, hadn't turned to a servant as if he had received a sudden inspiration and gestured that he should bring up a bottle of his best vintage.

"Mayor, gentlemen," he said, "a toast to the Count-Duke! I'll let you be the judge of whether the wine is worthy of the man." The Mayor replied with a bow, expressing his special appreciation, since he considered everything done or said in honor of the Count-Duke to be a tribute, in part, to himself.

"Long live Don Gaspar de Guzmán, Count of Olivares, Duke of San Lúcar, great *privado* of King Philip the Great, our ruler!" he exclaimed, raising his glass.

* Ironically, the Count-Duke came out on the losing side, and the Duke of Nevers was ultimately installed as the new Duke of Mantua.

Privado, for those of you who don't know, was the term used in those days to indicate a royal favorite.

"May he live a thousand years!" everyone replied.

"Pour a glass for the padre," Don Rodrigo commanded.

"I'm so sorry," the friar replied, "but I've already made one exception to the rules, I couldn't possibly . . ."

"What!" demanded Don Rodrigo, "you would refuse to toast to the Count-Duke? Does this mean you are siding with the Navarrese?"

Navarrese was the term then used to disparage the French, taken from the princes of Navarre, who began to rule the country after Henry IV ascended to the throne.

In the face of such an exhortation, it is better to drink. All the diners sang out their exclamations, and their praises of the wine, except Professor Argle-Bargle, whose raised head, glazed eyes, and tight lips expressed far more than words ever could.

"What do you have to say, eh, counselor?" Don Rodrigo asked. Extracting from his glass a nose that was redder and shinier than the wine, Professor Argle-Bargle gave his answer, syllable by syllable. "I say, I pronounce, and I hereby sentence that this is the Olivares of wines—*Censui, et in eam ivi sententiam*—and that its equal cannot be found in all twenty-two kingdoms of our King, God bless him. I hereby declare and determine that the dinners of our illustrious Lord Don Rodrigo surpass the banquets of Heliogabalus, and that the famine is hereby banished and banned in perpetuity from this palace, where splendor resides and reigns."*

"Hear hear," they all shouted as one. But that word which the counselor had uttered so casually, *famine,* suddenly placed the grim subject at the center of everyone's thoughts. On this they all agreed, at least in principle, but the noise they made was almost louder than if they hadn't. Everyone was suddenly speaking at the same time. "There is no famine!" said one. "It's the hoarders . . ."

* Heliogabalus or Elagabalus (c. 203–22 C.E.), Roman emperor from 218 to 222, became emperor at the age of fourteen, and was renowned for his lavish and dissolute habits, including extravagant dinner parties.

"And the bakers," said another, "hiding the wheat. String 'em up!"

"That's right. String 'em up, without mercy!"

"After fair trials!" shouted the Mayor.

"Trials?" Count Attilio shouted even louder. "No. Summary justice. Grab three, four, five, or six—the richest and the greediest—and string 'em up."

"Make an example of them. Without examples nothing will change."

"String 'em up, and grain'll come pouring out of every corner."

Who among you, in passing by a country fair, has not laughed to hear the harmonizing of a company of troubadours, when, between songs, they tune their instruments. Each makes his instrument screech as loud as he can, the better to hear it above the racket of the others. So you can imagine the cacophony of those speeches, if we can call them that. Meanwhile the wine flowed freely, and its praises were sung, and rightly so, intermingled with opinions on economic justice. The words heard most sonorously and frequently were "nectar of the gods" and "string 'em up."

Don Rodrigo meanwhile was staring at the only person who remained quiet. He saw the friar sitting there motionless, giving no sign of impatience or haste, no attempt to remind his host that he was waiting, but looking as if he had no intention of leaving until he had said his piece. Don Rodrigo would have gladly forgone that conversation, but to take leave of a Capuchin without first hearing him out was not in keeping with his policies. Since the nuisance could not be avoided, he resolved to address it immediately and be done with it. He rose from the table, and the whole red-faced brigade stood with him, without ceasing their racket. Asking leave of his guests, he rather stiffly approached the friar, who had stood up immediately along with the others. And saying, "I am at your service," Don Rodrigo led him to another room.

Chapter 6

"How can I be of assistance to you?" asked Don Rodrigo, staking himself in the center of the room. This was how his words sounded, but the way he said them clearly meant: Mind whom you're speaking with, watch what you say, and be quick about it.

There was no faster or surer way to muster Padre Cristoforo's courage than to treat him disdainfully. He had been hesitating, searching for the right words and fingering the beads on the rosary he wore for a belt, as if hoping to find inspiration in one of them, but Don Rodrigo's provocation instantly brought to his lips a few too many. Realizing how important it was not to ruin his chances, or rather, and more to the point, the chances of others, he hastened to temper the sentences that had sprung to mind, and instead, with cautious humility, said, "I have come to propose an act of justice, to beg for your charity. Certain disreputable characters have used your name to intimidate a poor priest, prevent him from performing his duties, and oppress an innocent young couple. With a single word, you can stop them, restore the force of law, and bring relief to those who have suffered such cruel violence. You can, and therefore . . . your conscience, your honor . . ."

"I'll allow you to speak about my conscience the day I come to you to make my confession. As for my honor, you should know that I and I alone am its guardian, and anyone who thinks they can share this responsibility is an insolent fool."

Padre Cristoforo thus stood forewarned that Don Rodrigo would twist his words, turn their conversation into a quarrel, and block any chance of getting to the point. So he doubled his resolve to be

patient and swallow whatever the other man felt like saying. He quickly responded, in a subdued tone, "If I have said anything to displease you, it was not my intention. Correct me if I'm wrong, or if I have spoken out of turn. But please hear me out. For the love of heaven, of God, before whose presence we all must appear . . ." As he said this, he grasped the wooden skull attached to his rosary and lifted it before the eyes of his glowering listener. "Do not persist in refusing a justice that is so simple and so deserved by the poor couple. Remember that God is always watching over them, and their cries of pain are heard in heaven. Innocence is powerful to his—"

"Eh, Padre," Don Rodrigo cut him off brusquely, "I have great respect for the habit you wear. But if there's anything that might make me forget this, it'd be to see the habit on a man who dares to stick his nose into my business in my own home."

Although these words set the priest's face ablaze, he continued on, with the look of someone swallowing bitter medicine. "You know I don't deserve to be called a spy. You know in your heart that my visit here today is neither cowardly nor contemptible. Hear what I have to say, Don Rodrigo, and heaven pray the day may never come that you will regret not having done so. Do not place your pride . . . such pride, Don Rodrigo! Such pride before mankind maybe, but not before God! Whatever you might do here on earth, up there—"

Don Rodrigo cut him off angrily, but not without a shudder of dread. "When I get a hankering to hear a sermon, you must realize that I'm perfectly capable of going to church like other people. But in my own home? Oh!" He continued, with a derisive sneer, "You flatter me. A preacher in my house? Only princes can afford such a luxury!"

"The same God that calls on princes to account for the word he brings to them in their palaces; that same God is now showing you his mercy by sending his minister, unworthy and poor though he may be, but still his minister, to intercede on behalf of an innocent—"

"Let me be brief," said Don Rodrigo, making as if to go. "I don't

know what you're insinuating. What I do know is that there must be some girl you care about. Go confide in whomever you wish. But do not take the liberty of wasting a gentleman's time with such petty annoyances."

At Don Rodrigo's movement, the friar blocked his path, but with great respect, of course. Raising his hands, to both plead with and stop him, he continued to speak. "I do care about her, it's true, but no more than I do about you. Two souls that I care about more than my own blood. Don Rodrigo! The only thing I can do for you is pray to God, and I'm happy to do so. Do not tell me not to. I do not want a poor innocent girl to be filled with fear and distress. One word from you is all it would take."

"Well, then," said Don Rodrigo, "since you think I can do so much for this person, and you've taken her to heart . . ."

"Yes?" Fra Cristoforo resumed anxiously, knowing from Don Rodrigo's demeanor not to yield to the optimism his words would seem to suggest.

"Well, then, advise her to come place herself under my protection. She will want for nothing, and no one will dare harass her, on my word as a gentleman."

At this, the indignation the priest had struggled to repress boiled over. All his resolve to be prudent and patient went up in smoke. His old self joined with the new; in a moment like this, Fra Cristoforo was truly two men in one.

"Your protection!" he exclaimed, taking two steps back and leaning defiantly on his right foot. With his right hand on his hip he pointed his left index finger at Don Rodrigo and glared at him with two fiery eyes. "Your protection! I'm glad you spoke this way, and that you made such a proposal. Now you've gone too far. You don't frighten me anymore!"

"How dare you speak to me like this!"

"I'm speaking to a man who has been forsaken by God, and can no longer be feared. Your protection, you say? I already knew that that innocent girl was under God's protection. But you . . . now I'm more certain than ever that I should hold nothing back when I

speak to you. Lucia, I say. See how I say her name with my head held high, without batting an eye."

"How dare you! In this house!"

"I pity this house. A curse is hanging over it. Wait and see whether divine justice will have any consideration for this pile of rocks, or any fear of your petty gang of thugs. Did you think that God made a creature in his own image to give you the pleasure of tormenting her? Did you think that God couldn't defend her? You have rejected his warning and brought down his judgment upon yourself. The Pharaoh's heart was as hard as yours, and God was still able to break it. Lucia is safe from you. Mark my words, although I am just a poor friar. As for you, listen carefully to what I promise you. The day will come . . ."

Until that moment Don Rodrigo had been at a loss for words, stunned, caught between anger and shock. But at the first sounds of a prophecy, his anger was joined by a remote and mysterious dread.

He grabbed that threatening hand in the air and, raising his voice to cut off the ominous voice of the prophet, shouted, "Out of my sight, you insolent peasant, you cowled beggar!"

These sharp words immediately quieted Padre Cristoforo. The idea of mistreatment and villainy had long been associated, in his mind, with the need for sufferance and silence. Don Rodrigo's compliments, however, drained him of all fury and passion. He resolved to listen in silence to whatever the man cared to add. So he calmly withdrew his hand from Don Rodrigo's clutches, lowered his head, and stood still, like a shaken tree that, at the lull of the wind in the midst of a storm, opens its branches into their natural shape and receives the hail that the heavens rain down upon it.

"You vile upstart!" Don Rodrigo went on, "You think you're my equal? The habit on your cowardly back is the only thing standing between you and the caresses I usually bestow on people of your class to teach them manners. This time you can leave on your own two feet. But next time . . ." With this he pointed with imperious disdain at the door opposite the one through which they had en-

tered. Padre Cristoforo bowed his head and exited, leaving Don Rodrigo to furiously pace the field of battle.

As the friar closed the door behind him and entered the next room, he noticed a man slowly sneaking away, brushing against the wall, as if he did not wish to be seen from the room where the colloquy had taken place. He recognized the elderly servant who had welcomed him at the outside entrance. He had belonged to that house for maybe forty years, since before Don Rodrigo was born, having entered into the service of the master's father, another breed of man altogether. Upon his death, the new master dismissed the whole staff and hired a new crew, keeping only that one servant. Despite his age, and despite moral convictions and a manner of behavior completely contrary to Don Rodrigo's, he had two qualities to compensate for these faults: a high regard for the dignity of the house, and years of experience with protocol, whose ancient traditions and minute particulars he knew better than anyone. In the master's presence the poor old man would never dare to insinuate, much less openly express, his disapproval of the goings-on he witnessed every day. The most he ever did was mutter a criticism of his fellow servants, who would only laugh, and indeed, seemed to enjoy teasing him, trying to get him to say more than he had meant to, and to sing the praises of the way things used to be in the old days. The master only ever received word of those criticisms together with reports of the laughter they had provoked, so he, too, was amused rather than stung by them. Not to mention that, on days of invitation or reception, the old man became a serious, important personage.

Padre Cristoforo looked at the servant as he passed, greeted him, and continued on his way. The elderly man, however, came alongside him mysteriously, placed his finger to his lips, and then, with the same finger, signaled that the friar should follow him into a dark corridor. There he whispered, "Padre, I heard everything. I need to speak with you."

"Tell me quickly, my good man."

"Not here. I'd be in trouble if the master found out . . . But I know many things, and I'll try to come to the monastery tomorrow."

"Is some kind of mischief being plotted?"

"There's definitely something in the air. I'd already noticed earlier, but now I'll be on the lookout, and I hope to discover everything. Leave it to me. The things I see and hear! . . . Hellish things! I'm in a place that . . . But I want to save my soul."

"May God bless you!" As he whispered these words, the priest placed his hand on the white head of the servant, who, although he was his senior, had bowed down before him like a child. "God will reward you," Padre Cristoforo continued, "I'll be waiting for you tomorrow."

"I'll come," the servant replied, "but you have to leave immediately and please, for the love of heaven, don't mention my name." At this he took a look around and moved toward the other end of the corridor, to a hall next to the courtyard. Seeing that the coast was clear, he beckoned to the good friar, whose expression was a clearer response to his last remark than any number of spoken promises. He pointed to the door, and the friar left, without uttering another word.

The old man had eavesdropped at his master's door. Had he done the right thing? And was Fra Cristoforo right to praise him for it? According to the most common and least controversial rules, what he did was wrong. But couldn't this case be considered an exception? And are there exceptions to the most common and least controversial rules? The reader will have to settle these important questions by him- or herself. I have no wish to pass judgment. All I want are the facts of the story.

—

Once he was outside, with his back to that bleak house, Fra Cristoforo could breathe easier. He rushed downhill, his face flushed with anger, feeling agitated and upset, as anyone can imagine, by what he had heard and said. But the servant's unexpected appearance had lifted his spirits. He felt as if heaven had given him a visible sign of its protection. "Here's a thread," he thought, "a thread that

Providence has placed in my hands. In that very house! One I hadn't even dreamed of seeking!" Amid these ruminations, he looked up to the west and saw that the setting sun was about to touch the mountaintop, and realized how little daylight remained. Though his bones ached, weary from the various fatigues of the day, he quickened his pace so he could bring news of some kind to his wards and then reach the monastery by nightfall, which was one of the most rigid and strictly enforced rules of the Capuchin order.

Meanwhile, at Lucia's cottage, plans had been hatched and debated that I should share with the reader. After the friar's departure, the three left behind had remained in silence for some time: Lucia sadly preparing the meal; Renzo constantly on the verge of leaving, so as not to see her so dejected, yet unable to tear himself away; and Agnese, who appeared to be fully intent on her spinning wheel. In reality, however, she was concocting a plan, and when it seemed ripe, she broke the silence by saying:

"Listen, my children. If you're smart enough and brave enough, and if you trust your mother . . ." Lucia was startled to hear Agnese refer to Renzo as one of her children. The older woman continued: "I promise to get you out of this mess, better, perhaps, and more quickly than Padre Cristoforo, good man though he is." Lucia stood there, looking at her mother with a face that expressed more astonishment than trust in such an incredible promise. Renzo said at once, "Smart? Brave? Tell us, go ahead and tell us what we have to do."

"Isn't it true," Agnese continued, "that it would be a big step forward if you were already married? And that all the rest would be easier to fix?"

"Of course," said Renzo, "if we were married . . . our marriage would be honored the whole world over. Not far away from here, in the Bergamo area, they welcome silk-workers with open arms. Do you know how many times my cousin Bortolo has been urging me to go there to live with him, saying I'd make a fortune, like him? And if I never did, it's because . . . Oh, why hide it? . . . It's because my heart is here. Once we're married, we could all move there, set

up house, and live in peace and quiet, beyond the clutches of this scoundrel, and far from the temptation to do something I'd regret. Isn't that so, Lucia?"

"Yes," said Lucia, "but how?"

"Like I said," continued her mother, "if you're smart and brave, the deed is easy."

"Easy?" exclaimed the pair together, since the deed had turned out to be so extraordinarily and painfully difficult.

"Easy, if you know how to go about it," Agnese replied. "Listen carefully. I'll try to explain. People I know have told me—and I've seen a case myself—that to perform a wedding, you need the presence of the priest, but not necessarily his consent. He just has to be present."

"What do you mean?" Renzo asked.

"Listen and I'll tell you. You need a clear plan and to find two witnesses who are quick on their feet. You go to the priest. You have to catch him by surprise, so he doesn't have time to get away. The man says: Father, this is my wife. The woman says: Father, this is my husband. The priest has to hear them, as do the witnesses, and the marriage is done, as holy as if the Pope himself had performed it. Once the words are pronounced the priest can scream and shout, carry on to high heavens, but he'd be wasting his breath. You'll be man and wife."

"Really?" exclaimed Lucia.

"Of course," said Agnese, "do you think in the thirty years I've spent in this world before the two of you came along I haven't learned a thing or two? It's like I said. In fact, that's exactly how a friend of mine, who wanted to marry against her parents' wishes, managed to get her way. The priest, who suspected she might make an attempt, was on his guard. But those two devils were so clever that they caught him at just the right time, said their vows, and became man and wife. Although the poor girl did come to regret it three days later."

Agnese was right about both the possibility and the risks of failure. That is to say, the only ones who resorted to this expedient

were people to whom the usual avenue had been blocked or rejected, so priests were very careful to avoid being forced into cooperation. And when such a couple, accompanied by witnesses, still managed to surprise a priest, he did all he could to escape, like Proteus from the clutches of those who wanted to force a prophecy from him.*

"What if it's true, Lucia," said Renzo, looking at her expectantly, imploringly.

"What do you mean, *if*!" said Agnese. "You think I'm making it all up? After everything I've done for you, you still don't believe me? In that case, you can get out of this mess on your own. I wash my hands of it!"

"No, please, don't abandon us," Renzo replied, "I only meant that it seems too good to be true. I'm in your hands. You are like a mother to me."

These words chased away Agnese's brief spat of indignation.

"Then why," asked Lucia meekly, "didn't Padre Cristoforo think of it, Mamma?"

"Why?" Agnese replied. "Of course he'll have thought of it. But he didn't want to say anything."

"Why not?" the two young people asked as one.

"Because . . . because. Well if you must know, the priests say that it's not really right."

"Do you mean they don't really like it, but when it's done it's done?" asked Renzo.

"What do you want me to say?" replied Agnese. "They make the laws as they see fit. And we poor people don't understand everything. And then, so many things . . . You see, it's like punching another man. It's not right. But once it's done, not even the Pope can take it back."

"If it's not right," said Lucia, "then we shouldn't do it."

* In Greek mythology, the sea god Proteus was the Old Man of the Sea who could foretell the future but would change shape to avoid doing so (hence the adjective *protean*).

"What!" cried Agnese. "Do you think I'd advise you to do anything against the fear of God? If it were against your parents' wishes to marry some fool . . . but since I'm in favor, and this boy here is the groom, and the troublemaker is a scoundrel, and the priest . . ."

"It's as clear as day," added Renzo.

"Not a word to Padre Cristoforo beforehand," Agnese continued, "but once the deed is done, and done well, what do you think he'll have to say? 'Oh, my, haven't we been the naughty children. But what's done is done.' Because that's the way priests are supposed to talk. But in his heart, believe me, he'll be happy, too."

Lucia still seemed unconvinced, not sure of how to respond to her mother's reasoning. Renzo, on the other hand, was encouraged and said, "In that case, consider the deed as good as done."

"Slow down," said Agnese, "what about witnesses? You have to find two people who are willing, and in the meantime know how to keep their mouths shut! Then you have to surprise the priest, who's been holed up in the rectory for two days now. And make him stay there. Even though he's a bit on the heavy side, believe me, as soon as he sees you appear together, he'll become as quick as a cat, and flee like the devil from holy water."

"I've got it! I know a way!" shouted Renzo, pounding his fist on the table so hard that the dishes jumped. He then proceeded to spell out his thinking, which Agnese approved in each and every detail.

"I don't like any of this," said Lucia, when her fiancé had finished, "it's too sneaky. Everything we've done so far has been honest. Let's hold strong to our faith, and God will find a way. Padre Cristoforo himself said so. Let's wait to hear his opinion."

"Take the advice of someone who knows a little more than you," Agnese said, with a serious expression on her face. "Do we really need to ask for anyone else's opinion? God helps those who help themselves. We'll tell the padre everything once the deed is done."

"Lucia," said Renzo, "would you let me down now? Haven't we done everything like good Christians? Shouldn't we already be husband and wife? Didn't the priest set the day and time? Whose fault

is it if we have to think for ourselves now? No, you're not going to let me down. I'm leaving and I'll be back with the answer." Saying goodbye to Lucia with a pleading gesture, and to Agnese with an air of complicity, he was out the door.

Troubles sharpen your wits. Until yesterday, Renzo had walked the straight and narrow path in life without ever having occasion to tax his brain. Now he had to come up with a plan that would do credit to a jurist. With this in mind he went straight to the cottage of a certain Tonio, which was not far away. He found Tonio in the kitchen, one knee pressed against the hearth of the fireplace, one hand gripping the rim of a kettle set in the hot embers, and stirring a small buckwheat polenta with a wooden spoon. His mother, brother, and wife were seated at the table. Three or four little children were standing next to their father, staring at the kettle, waiting for the moment when he would pour out the contents. But there was none of the joy that the sight of supper usually gives to those who have earned it through hard work. The size of the polenta had been determined by the harvest rather than by the number and appetite of the mouths to be fed. Each of them, casting a sidelong glance at the communal meal with rabid desire, seemed to be thinking of how much of their appetite would remain unfulfilled. As Renzo was exchanging greetings with the family, Tonio poured the polenta onto a wooden board, forming a small moon beneath a big circle of steam. The women did not forget their manners, asking Renzo, "Would you like to join us?" a courtesy that the peasants of Lombardy—and of countless other countries—never fail to pay someone who stops by at mealtime, even a rich glutton who has just risen from his own well-laden table while his hosts are down to their last spoonful.

"Thank you," answered Renzo, "I only stopped by for a word with Tonio. And if you like, Tonio, so as not to disturb the women, we can go to the tavern to have a bite and talk." For Tonio the offer was as welcome as it was unexpected. The women, and even the children (who, on the subject of food, learned to add and subtract at a very early age) did not mind the withdrawal from the polenta

competition of a rival, and the most formidable rival at that. Without further questions, he went with Renzo.

At the village tavern, they were able to sit wherever they pleased, and in perfect solitude, since poverty had weaned all the regular customers from this bower of delights. After ordering what little was available, and emptying a pitcher of wine, Renzo told Tonio, with a mysterious air, "If you can do me a small favor, I can do you a big one."

"Your wish is my command. Speak up," Tonio replied, pouring more wine. "Today I'd walk through fire for you."

"I hear that you owe the priest twenty-five liras on the lease for farmland you worked last year."

"You're ruining my appetite, Renzo! Why'd you bring that up? So much for my good mood!"

"The only reason I mention your debt," Renzo explained, "is because, if you want, I can help you repay it."

"Really?"

"Really. Would that make you happy?"

"Happy? Of course it would! Especially since I wouldn't have to deal with the priest's dirty looks, the shaking of his head every time I run into him. He never stops nagging me. 'Tonio, don't forget.' 'Tonio, when are we going to see each other about our little business?' It's so bad that during the homily, when he stares at me with those eyes, I'm almost afraid that he's going to say, right there in public, 'What about those twenty-five liras!' I'm so sick of those twenty-five damn liras! Once I've paid up, he's supposed to give me back my wife's gold necklace, which I could trade for plenty of polenta."

"Well, if you could do me this one favor, the twenty-five liras are yours."

"Tell me more."

"But . . . !" Renzo added, placing his index finger over his lips.

"Do you even have to ask? You know me!"

"The priest is cooking up all sorts of nonsense to delay my wed-

ding, but I want to speed things up. They tell me it's a sure bet if the two spouses, with two witnesses, appear before the priest, and I say, 'This is my wife,' and Lucia says, 'This is my husband,' then we're as good as married. Do you get what I'm saying?"

"You want me to be your witness?"

"Exactly."

"And you'll pay the twenty-five liras that I owe?"

"That's my intention."

"You'd better keep your word!"

"We have to find a second witness."

"I've got just the person. That half-wit, my brother Gervaso, will do anything I tell him. Will you buy him a drink?"

"And something to eat," answered Renzo. "We can bring him along to celebrate. Will he know what to do?"

"I'll show him. You know, I got his share of the brains in the family."

"Tomorrow . . ."

"Good."

"Toward evening . . ."

"Great."

"But . . . !" said Renzo, placing his finger over his lips again.

"Come on," replied Tonio, tilting his head toward his right shoulder and raising his left hand. The look on his face said, "Don't insult me."

"But if your wife asks, and you know she will . . ."

"I'll come up with a fib. I've already told her so many we'll never even the score. I'll find some excuse to set her mind at ease."

"Tomorrow morning," said Renzo, "we'll have more time to talk and get all the details straight."

At that they left the tavern. Tonio headed home, trying to figure out what kind of a fib to tell the women. Renzo, for his part, was preparing to report to Agnese and Lucia the arrangements he had made.

Agnese in the meantime had been struggling in vain to win over

her daughter. Lucia would have none of it, rejecting first one and then the other argument. If the action was wrong, then it should not be done. If it was right, then why not tell Padre Cristoforo?

Renzo returned in triumph. He delivered his report and concluded with an "ahem," by which he meant to say, "What a man I am! Isn't that the perfect solution? Who would have thought of it!" and a hundred similar things.

Lucia shook her head softly. The two enthusiastic conspirators paid her little mind, the way you treat a child to whom you've given up trying to explain something, planning to convince her later by pleading or demanding.

"All right," said Agnese, "all right, but . . . you haven't thought of everything."

"What did we leave out?" replied Renzo.

"Perpetua. You forgot about Perpetua. Tonio and his brother—she'll let them in. But when she sees the two of you . . . Think. I'm sure she's been given instructions to keep you as far away as a hungry boy from a tree of ripe pears."

Puzzled, Renzo asked, "So what should we do?"

"Don't worry. I've thought of everything. I'll come with you. I've got a trick to get her attention. I'll work my magic on her so she won't notice the two of you sneaking in. I'll stop by, get her talking . . . you'll see."

"God bless you!" exclaimed Renzo. "I've always said that you come to our aid in everything."

"But all of this will be for nothing if she refuses to be convinced," Agnese said, pointing to her daughter. "She keeps saying it's not right."

Renzo lent his own eloquence to the cause, but Lucia wouldn't budge.

"I don't know how to respond to your arguments," she said, "but I do know that, to do things the way you say, we'll have to lie, be sneaky, deceitful. Oh, Renzo, this is not how we began! I do want to be your wife"—there was no way she could utter this word, and express this intention, without blushing—"I want to be your wife,

but in the right way, with the fear of God, at the altar. Let's place ourselves in the hands of God. Don't you think that he has a better solution for getting us out of this mess than all your scheming? And why would we keep secrets from Fra Cristoforo?"

The argument was still going, with no end in sight, when the friar's arrival was announced by a hurried pitter-patter of sandals and the sound of a cowl flapping, like the wind beating inside a slackened sail. Everyone quieted down, and Agnese had barely enough time to whisper into Lucia's ear, "Mind yourself. And don't breathe a word to the padre of what we just discussed."

Chapter 7

Padre Cristoforo arrived looking like a good captain who, through no fault of his own, had lost an important battle: distressed but not discouraged, pensive but not panicking, in a hurry but not in flight. He goes where need dictates, to protect places under siege, muster his troops, and issue new orders.

"Peace be with you," he said as he came in. "That man is hopeless, I'm afraid. The best we can do is trust in God, and I already have had some promise of His protection."

None of the three, it is true, had stored much hope in Padre Cristoforo's endeavor, since for a powerful man to desist from an act of aggression without being forced to, as a mere concession to unarmed prayers, was not only rare but unheard of. Still, this grim confirmation came as a blow to them all. The women bowed their heads. In Renzo's heart, anger prevailed over dejection. Even before this announcement, he had been embittered by many painful surprises, many failed attempts, and many disappointed hopes, all of which were exacerbated, in that moment, by Lucia's refusals.

"I'd like to know," he shouted, gritting his teeth and raising his voice, which he had never done in Padre Cristoforo's presence before, "what reasons that dog came up with to argue . . . to argue that my bride should not be my bride."

"Poor Renzo," the friar replied in a grave, compassionate voice and a look that ordered him, affectionately, to stay calm. "If a powerful man intent on committing an injustice always had to explain why, the world would be a different place."

"So did that dog admit that he's against it because he's against it?"

"Not even that much, my poor boy. It'd be to our advantage if, to commit the crime, he had to confess it openly."

"But that hellhound must have said something. What did he say?"

"I heard his words, but I couldn't repeat them to you. The utterances of a powerful and evil man are both piercing and elusive. He'll fret and fume at your suspicions of him at the same time as he confirms them. He'll insult you and say he's offended, ridicule you and consult your opinion, terrify and whine, be rude and irreproachable. Ask for no more details. He did not utter this innocent girl's name or yours. He pretended he didn't even know you, and was not angling for anything. But . . . unfortunately, I got the strong sense that he will not budge.

"All the same, we must place our faith in God! Don't lose heart, my children. And you, Renzo . . . believe me when I say I put myself in your shoes, I can feel what is going through your heart. But be patient! Patience is a meager word, a bitter word, for non-believers. But you? . . . Won't you grant God one day, two days, the time He needs to make justice triumph? Time belongs to Him, and He has promised us eternity! Place this matter in His hands, Renzo, and you should know . . . all of you should know that I've found a thread to help you. That's all I can say for now.

"Tomorrow I won't be able to come up here. I have to be at the monastery all day, for your sake. Renzo, try to come by. Or if for some unforeseen reason you can't, send someone you trust, a smart boy, who can take a message back to you. It's getting dark. I have to run to the monastery. Faith. Courage. God be with you."

At this he hurried on his way, running, almost skipping, down the crooked, stony path so that he would not be late to the monastery. Otherwise he'd catch a good scolding, or worse, a penance that would keep him from being ready and able the next day to do whatever his wards might require.

"Did you hear what he said about, what did he call it . . . a thread that he's found to help us?" said Lucia. "We'd do better to trust him. When he makes a promise . . ."

"Is that the best he can do?" Agnese broke in. "He should have spoken more plainly, or pulled me aside to tell me what—"

"Enough talk!" This time Renzo cut in, pacing up and down the room. "I know how to put an end to this!" His voice and expression left no doubt as to the meaning of his words.

"Oh, Renzo!" exclaimed Lucia.

"What do you mean?" exclaimed Agnese.

"Do I have to say it? I'll put an end to this story. I don't care whether he's possessed by a hundred, a thousand demons. In the end he's just flesh and blood."

"No, please, for heaven's sake!" Lucia began, but her voice was choked with tears.

"You shouldn't say such things, even if you're joking," added Agnese.

"Joking?" shouted Renzo, standing directly in front of her, his eyes glaring. "Joking? I'll show you who's joking."

"Oh, Renzo," Lucia struggled to say amid her sobs, "I've never seen you like this."

"Watch your words, for heaven's sake," Agnese quickly repeated, lowering her voice. "Have you forgotten how many men he has at his command? And even if you did . . . God help us! . . . The poor can never escape justice."

"I'll take justice into my own hands! It's high time I did. It won't be easy, I know. That murderous dog had better watch his back. He's well guarded, but it doesn't matter. Patience and determination . . . and the moment will arrive. I'll take justice into my own hands, and rid the town of him while I'm at it. Everyone will thank me! And then, in a leap and a bound, I'll be off to . . ."

Lucia's horror at these unvarnished words stopped her weeping and gave her the strength to speak. Lifting her tear-streaked face from her palms, she told Renzo, in a heartrending but firm voice, "So, having me for your wife no longer matters to you? I was engaged to a God-fearing boy. But a man who . . . even if he were safe from justice and vengeance, even if he were the King's son . . ."

"So be it!" shouted Renzo, his face more distraught than ever. "I

won't have you, but he won't have you, either! I'll be on this earth without you, and he'll be in the devil's . . ."

"No, stop. Don't say that, for mercy's sake. Don't look at me like that. I can't stand to see you this way," Lucia exclaimed, weeping, begging with clasped hands, while Agnese kept repeating the young man's name, over and over, rubbing his shoulders, his arms, his hands, to calm him down. He stood there for a while without moving, lost in thought, contemplating the imploring look on Lucia's face. Then, all of a sudden, he glared at her, took a step back, pointed his arm and index finger at his beloved, and shouted, "Her. It's her that he wants! I'll kill him first!"

"And me? What did I ever do to you, for you to kill me like this?" cried Lucia, throwing herself on her knees.

"You!" he replied in a voice that expressed a different kind of anger, but anger all the same. "You! Do you really care for me? What proof do I have? Haven't I begged you, and begged you, and begged you? And all you ever say is, 'No, no!' "

"Yes, yes," Lucia quickly replied. "I will come to the priest with you tomorrow if that's what you want. Go back to being the man you were. I'll come."

"Promise me?" said Renzo, with a voice and a face that had suddenly become more human.

"I promise."

"I'll hold you to it."

"The Lord be praised," exclaimed Agnese, who was twice as happy.

In the middle of his tantrum, was Renzo calculating how to take advantage of Lucia's fear? Was he putting on an act to increase it, to exploit it? Our author claims that he doesn't know, and I'm sure not that even Renzo himself was fully aware of the answer. The facts of the matter are that he was truly furious at Don Rodrigo, and he truly yearned for Lucia's consent to his original plan. When two strong passions clash in a man's heart, no one, not even the heart's owner, can clearly distinguish one from the other, and say with certainty which of the two will prevail.

"I've made my promise," Lucia replied, in a tone of shy and affectionate rebuke, "but you promised me that you're not going to make a scene, and that you will submit to Fra Cristoforo."

"Come now. Why do you think I lost my temper? Do you want to go back on your promise now? And make me do something I'll regret?"

"No, no," replied Lucia, who was starting to grow alarmed again. "I've made my promise, and I won't go back on it. But you have to recognize how you extracted that promise from me. God does not wish . . ."

"Why do you have to be such a naysayer, Lucia? God knows we're not hurting anyone."

"Promise me at least that this will be the last time we do such a thing."

"I promise, with my heart in my hand."

"But this time you'd better stick to it," said Agnese.

Here the author of our manuscript admits to something else he doesn't know: Namely, whether Lucia is truly and completely unhappy at having been forced to consent. Like him, we will have to leave this question up in the air.

Renzo would have liked to prolong the discussion, and settle each and every detail of what they were to do the next day, but it was already dark, and the women wished him a good night, since they did not think it proper for him to linger on at that hour.

For all three, it was as rough a night as you might expect after a tumultuous and troubling day, as well as before a day destined for an important enterprise of uncertain outcome. Renzo reappeared early in the morning and planned with the women—or rather with Agnese—the grand operation for that evening, imagining and resolving the difficulties, foreseeing setbacks, and taking turns summarizing the matter, the way you would relate a past event. Lucia listened, and without approving in words what her heart could not accept, she promised to do her best.

"Will you be going down to the monastery to speak with Fra Cristoforo, as he asked you to last night?" Agnese asked Renzo.

"Are you crazy?" he replied. "You know what sharp eyes the friar has. He'd read my face like a book and know that something was up. And if he started asking questions, I wouldn't come out of it very well. Anyway, I need to stay here to take care of business. You'd better send someone else."

"I'll send Menico."

"Good idea," replied Renzo. And he left, to take care of business, as he had put it.

Agnese went to a neighboring house to ask for Menico, a bright twelve-year-old boy who, through cousins and in-laws, had become a sort of nephew to her. She asked his parents if she couldn't borrow him for the day, so to speak, to run an errand, she said. After they said yes, she took him into the kitchen, fed him breakfast, and told him to go to Pescarenico to see Padre Cristoforo, who would have a message for him to bring back when he was ready. "Fra Cristoforo, that nice old man, you know, the one with the white beard that they call the saint . . ."

"I know him," Menico said, "the one that's always patting us children on the head, and that every now and then gives us a holy card."

"That's him, Menico. And if he tells you to wait a little while, near the monastery, don't go wandering off. Make sure that you don't disappear with your friends to the lake, to watch the fishing, to play with the nets hung up to dry, or to play that game you like so much . . ."

You should know that Menico was very good at skipping stones, and we all know that everyone, old or young, is happy to do the things at which they excel. Well, and not only those.

"Come on, Auntie, I'm not a little boy."

"Fine. Use your head. When you're back with his message . . . Look here: These two brand-new coins will be for you."

"Can't I have them now? What difference does it make?"

"No, you'd only fritter them away. Go now. Do a good job and there'll be even more."

For the remainder of that long morning, there were strange goings-on that raised no small amount of suspicion in the women's

already nervous minds. A beggar who was neither as emaciated nor as ragged as his peers, with a somehow dark and sinister appearance, came by to beg for alms, casting furtive looks around. He was given a piece of bread that he accepted and tucked away with barely concealed indifference. He then lingered, with a mixture of boldness and hesitation, asking many questions to which Agnese hastened to give the wrong answers. Then, making as if to leave, he deliberately took the wrong door, going through the one that led to the stairs, and stealing a quick look around. When shouts followed him, "Hey! Where are you going, good man? Over this way!" he turned around and left through the exit indicated, apologizing with a meekness, an affected humility, that did not quite match the harsh features of his face. Throughout the day, other strange figures kept appearing. What kind of men they were, it was hard to say, though no one believed they were the honest travelers they pretended to be. One came in on the excuse that he needed directions. Others slowed down as they passed by the front door, casting a fleeting glance through the courtyard, like a person who wants to see without being seen. Finally, around noon, the unsettling procession came to an end. Agnese got up every now and then, crossed the courtyard, peered out of the front gate, glanced right and then left, and came back saying, "Nobody," a word that she uttered with relief, and that Lucia heard with equal relief, without either of them knowing exactly why. But they both continued to feel on edge, which sapped them, especially the daughter, of much of the courage they were storing up for that evening.

The reader should know something more specific about these mysterious men lurking about. To tell the whole story, we have to retrace our steps and pay a return visit to Don Rodrigo, whom we last saw yesterday, all by himself in a hall of his palace, after the departure of Fra Cristoforo.

Don Rodrigo, as we said, was pacing back and forth in the hall, making long strides between the walls from which generations of family portraits were hung. When he came to one wall and turned around, he found himself before an ancient warrior, a terror to both

his enemies and his soldiers. He had a stern gaze, short hair standing on end, a mustache twirled into two points that protruded from his cheeks, and a slanted chin. Fully armored in greaves, cuisses, a cuirass, brassards, and gauntlets—all made of steel—the hero stood erect, right hand on his hip, left on the hilt of his sword. Don Rodrigo stared back at him. When he turned around again, he found himself facing another ancestor, a judge, the terror of litigants and lawyers alike, seated on a big armchair upholstered in red velvet. He was ensconced in a wide robe, all black except for a white collar with two wide bands and an exposed sable lining (the distinctive uniform of senators, who only wore it in winter, which is why you never see their portraits in summer dress). His face was gaunt, his brow furrowed. In his hand he held a petition and seemed to be saying: "We shall see." To one side, a matron, the terror of her maids; to the other, an abbot, the terror of his monks: All people, in short, who had sown a terror that still radiated from these canvases.

In the presence of ancestors like that, Don Rodrigo became even more unsettled. He was ashamed and agitated that a friar had dared to lecture him with all the presumption of the prophet Nathan before King David.* He drew up a plan for revenge, discarded it, and pondered how he could satisfy both his passion and what he called "his honor." At times (believe it or not), with the first words of that prophecy ringing in his ears, he could feel goosebumps, and was almost ready to give up on the idea of having his way with Lucia and the friar. Finally, just for the sake of doing something, he called a servant, ordered him to make his excuses to the guests, saying he had been detained by an urgent matter. When the servant came back to report that the gentlemen had left, sending their regards, Don Rodrigo, still pacing, asked, "What about Count Attilio?"

"He left with the others, my lord."

"Good. Six men to escort me on my walk. At once! My sword, my cloak, my hat—at once!"

* The prophet Nathan rebuked David for his adultery with Bathsheba and for arranging the murder of her husband, General Uriah (2 Samuel 7–12).

The servant left, bowing in reply, and returned a few minutes later, carrying the elaborate sword, which his master buckled on; the cloak, which he threw over his shoulders; and a long-feathered hat, which he set on his head, with a fierce yank of his hand: a sign of troubled waters. He set off and, at the door, found his six henchmen, armed and ready. They parted to let him through, bowed, and fell in behind him. More surly, arrogant, and grumpy than usual, he left and made his way on foot to Lecco. Seeing him arrive, the peasants and tradesmen huddled close to the walls, from where they doffed their hats and made deep bows, which he did not acknowledge. The so-called *signori* also bowed, as his inferiors, since in this area, no one in a thousand miles could compete with him in name, wealth, connections, and the wish to exploit all of these to flaunt his superiority. Them he acknowledged with a begrudging condescension. Not on that day, but when he did happen to bump into the Spanish castellan, both parties made an equally deep bow, as was only right between two powerful men who had no dealings with each other, but, for the sake of propriety, paid homage to their respective ranks.

To chase away his foul mood, and to replace the image of the friar invading his thoughts with a completely different one, Don Rodrigo entered a house of ill repute, where he was received with the lavish and deferential cordiality accorded men who make themselves either greatly loved or greatly feared. Later that night, he returned to his palace. Count Attilio had also just arrived back. Dinner was served, during which Don Rodrigo kept to himself and spoke very little.

"Cousin, when are you going to settle that bet?" Count Attilio teased, with a certain malice, once the table had been cleared and the servants had retired.

"It's not the Feast of Saint Martin yet."*

* The Feast of Saint Martin of Tours, celebrated every year on November 11, is traditionally the date when the new wine is poured.

"You might as well settle now. We'll celebrate every saint's day in the calendar before . . ."

"We'll see about that."

"Cousin, you're playing the politician, but I can see through you. I'm so sure I've won our bet that I'm ready to make another."

"Let's hear it."

"That padre . . . Padre . . . what's his name? The friar, I mean. He's converted you."

"There you go again."

"Converted, cousin, converted, I say. And I'm enjoying this. You can't imagine how much fun it'll be to see you contrite, with your eyes on the ground! And what a victory for the friar. He must have strutted home with his chest puffed out! A fish like you doesn't get caught every day, or with just any net.* You can be sure he'll use you as an example. And when he gives his sermons, he'll talk about your life. I can almost hear him." Speaking through his nose and accompanying his words with exaggerated gestures, he adopted the tone of a preacher. "In that part of the world, which out of respect I shall not name, there lately lived, my dear listeners, and perhaps still does, a dissolute knight, more a friend to women than to respectable men, who, accustomed to tarring everyone with the same brush, had set his eyes . . ."†

"Enough, enough!" interrupted Don Rodrigo, half amused and half annoyed. "If you want to double the bet, I'm game."

"You devil! Don't tell me you converted the friar, instead!"

"Not another word about him. As for the bet, we'll let Saint

* This expression echoes Matthew 4:19: "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men."

† Don Attilio here is referencing the opening lines of book 1, chapter 2, of Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones:* "In that part of the western division of this kingdom which is commonly called Somersetshire, there lately lived, and perhaps lives still, a gentleman whose name was Allworthy, and who might well be called the favourite of both nature and fortune; for both of these seem to have contended which should bless and enrich him most."

Martin decide." The count's curiosity was aroused. He pestered Don Rodrigo with questions, but his cousin parried every single one, always deferring to the day of decision, and not wanting to reveal to his opponent plans that were neither underway nor fully settled.

The next morning Don Rodrigo woke up as Don Rodrigo again. The dread planted in his bones by that warning, "The day will come," had vanished together with the dreams of the night. All that remained was his anger, exacerbated by shame over his momentary weakness. The most recent memories of his triumphal walk, the bows, the welcome, and his cousin's teasing were of no small help in restoring his former spirits. As soon as he rose, he sent for Griso. "Must be something big," thought the servant who was to deliver the message, since the man bearing that nickname was none other than the chief bravo, the one who did all the dirtiest and most dangerous jobs, the master's most trusted man, who belonged to him completely, both out of gratitude and self-interest. After killing a man in broad daylight, and in a public square, he had gone to Don Rodrigo to beg for his protection. Don Rodrigo dressed him in his livery and shielded him from the long arm of the law. By pledging to commit any crime he was ordered to by his new master, Griso was guaranteed impunity for that initial crime. And for Don Rodrigo, Griso was no small acquisition. In addition to being his most valorous servant, unequaled, Griso was also living proof that his master could toy with the law as he pleased, thus increasing both the reality and the reputation of his power.

"Griso!" said Don Rodrigo. "Here's an opportunity to prove your worth. Before tomorrow, I want Lucia here in this palace."

"Let it never be said that Griso refused an order from his illustrious master."

"Take as many men as you need, assemble and order them around as you think best. So long as the outcome is good. But above all, make sure she comes to no harm."

"My Lord, we'll scare her just a little, to keep her from making too much noise . . . there's no way to avoid it."

"To scare her . . . I know . . . it can't be avoided. But don't touch a hair on her head. And above all, be respectful to her in every way. Do you understand?"

"My lord, one cannot pluck a flower from the stem and present it to your Lordship without touching it. We will do no more than necessary."

"That will be your responsibility. So . . . how do you plan to go about this?

"I was thinking, my lord. We're lucky her cottage is on the edge of town. We need a place where we can meet. Not far away there's an isolated house in the middle of the field. That house . . . your Lordship might not know . . . caught fire a few years ago, and the owners didn't have the money to repair it, so they abandoned it. Nowadays only the witches go there. But today is not their Sabbath. The villagers are superstitious. There's not a night they would stop by that house for all the money in the world. But that kind of stuff makes me laugh. So we can wait there, knowing that no one will come by to spoil our plan."

"Good. And then?"

After further proposals from Griso and objections from Don Rodrigo were voiced, the two men agreed on how to carry out the job without leaving any trace of the perpetrators; cast suspicion on others, by leaving false clues; force poor Agnese to keep her mouth shut; terrify Renzo so much that he'd forget his sorrow along with any thoughts of seeking justice or even any desire to complain; and devise all the other tricks they'd need to pull off the biggest trick of them all.

I won't report their discussion since, as the reader will see, we don't really need their words to understand the story. And I myself am only too happy not to waste any more time eavesdropping on the scheming of these two dastardly scoundrels. All we need to know is that when Griso was halfway out the door, ready to set the plan in motion, Don Rodrigo called him back and said, "Listen. If that insolent jerk should happen to get in your way tonight, it wouldn't be a bad idea to give him a few lashes on his back to re-

member you by. That way we can be sure he'll heed our warning to keep his mouth shut tomorrow. But don't go looking for him. I don't want you distracted from the main goal. Do I make myself clear?"

"Leave it to me," replied Griso, making a bow that was both obsequious and brash. And he was gone. His morning was spent wandering about to survey the village. That fake beggar who had infiltrated the poor little cottage was none other than Griso, who had gone in to memorize its layout. The fake wayfarers were his henchmen, who only needed a superficial knowledge of the place to execute his orders. Having scouted the place out sufficiently, they disappeared, to avoid raising suspicions.

Back at the palace, Griso made his report and put the finishing touches on the plan. Every man was assigned his role and given instructions. But none of this could take place without reaching the eyes and the ears of the elderly servant, who had been on the alert, realizing that something big was underway. By gathering bits of information here and there, and deciphering an obscure word or interpreting a strange movement, he managed to piece together a clear picture of what was supposed to happen that night. By then, however, the hour was near, and a small advance team of bravi had already gone to hide out in the ruined house. Although the poor old man was well aware of the dangerous game he was playing, and feared arriving too late and in vain, he did not want to fail. On the excuse that he needed some fresh air, he left and made his way to the monastery, quickly quickly, to give Fra Cristoforo the promised warning.

Shortly after the old man's departure, the remaining bravi set out, descending to the village one at a time, to avoid giving the appearance of a troop. Griso came last. The only thing left behind was a closed sedan chair, which would be taken to the abandoned house in the late evening. Once the team had gathered at the appointed place, Griso sent three men to the village tavern. One was to station himself by the door, to observe what was happening on the street, and to see when all of the villagers had turned in for the night. The

other two were to go inside to gamble and drink, like regular customers. At the same time, they were to keep an eye out, if there was indeed something to keep an eye on. Griso, with the rest of the troop, remained in hiding.

The poor old man was still rushing to the monastery, the three bravi were reaching their post, and the sun was setting when Renzo came to the women and said, "Tonio and Gervaso are waiting for me outside. I'm going to go to the tavern with them to have a bite to eat. When the bell tolls the 'Ave Maria,' we'll come by to get you. Courage, Lucia! Timing is everything."

Lucia sighed and repeated, "Courage," in a voice that contradicted the word.

When Renzo and his two partners reached the tavern, they found Griso's sentinel already at his post, taking up half the doorway, his back leaning against the frame, his arms folded across his chest. He was looking around, to the right and to the left, flashing the whites and then the blacks of his rapacious eyes. A flat crimson velvet beret, worn at a slant, covered half his forelock. The other half was parted over his swarthy forehead, and came down under his ears on both sides, ending in braids at the nape of his neck held together by a comb. In one hand he was holding a big cudgel, and did not seem to be carrying a more conventional weapon. From the look on his face, however, even a child would have guessed he was concealing as many weapons as humanly possible.

Renzo got to the door first; the man, without budging, stared him in the eye. But the young man, intent on avoiding any trouble, as would anyone with a tricky business at hand, pretended not to notice. He didn't even bother to say, "Would you mind moving?" Brushing against the opposite side of the door jamb, he managed to slide sideways past that human caryatid. His companions had to do the same. Once inside, they saw the two bravi whose voices they had heard from outside. They were sitting at one end of the table, playing *morra,* both of them shouting out at the same time (as the game requires), pouring each other drinks from a big flask set be-

tween them, and making a huge racket.* They stared at the new arrivals. One of them in particular, with three grubby fingers in the air and his mouth still open from the loud "six" he had just shouted, looked Renzo up and down, from head to toe, winked at his partner, and then at the man by the door, who responded with a nod. Renzo, unsettled and suspicious, looked at his two guests, as if hoping to find in their expressions an interpretation of these signals, but all they indicated was a hearty appetite. The host looked at him as if awaiting their orders. Renzo drew him over to the next room and ordered their dinner.

"Who are those strangers," he asked in a soft voice, when the host came back with a coarse tablecloth under his arm and a flask in his hand.

"I don't know them," replied the host as he unfolded the tablecloth.

"What, not even one of them?"

"I'm sure you know," the man replied, smoothing the cloth on the table with both hands, "that the first rule of our trade is not to stick our nose into other people's business. Not even our women do. It would be begging for trouble, with so many people coming and going. It's like a seaport in here . . . when the harvest is good, that is. But we keep our spirits up. The times of plenty will be back. For us it's enough that our customers are honest men. We don't care who they are or aren't. And now I'll bring you a plate of meatballs, the likes of which you've never tasted."

"How can you know . . ." Renzo continued, but the host was already off to the kitchen. And there, while fetching the pan with the meatballs, one of the bravi who had been checking out our young man snuck up and asked in a whisper: "Who are those good people?"

* In the game of *morra,* two or more players throw down their hands, showing one or two fingers, while shouting out their guess of what the total number of fingers will be.

"Decent folk from here in the village," replied the host, while ladling the meatballs into a plate.

"Yes, but what are their names? Who are they?" the man insisted, somewhat rudely.

"One is Renzo," the host replied, also in a whisper, "a fine young man with a good head on his shoulders. He's a silk-worker and he's good at what he does. The other is a peasant named Tonio: a good lad, cheerful. Shame he hasn't got much money, since he'd spend it all here. The other is a half-wit, but he's only too happy to eat whenever you put a plate in front of him. Begging your pardon . . ."

He tripped as he emerged from between the stove and his questioner, and brought the plate to another customer. "How can you be sure," asked Renzo, picking up where he had left off when the host reappeared, "that they're honest men if you don't know them?"

"By their actions, my friend: You can tell a man by his actions. Those who drink their wine without criticizing it. Pay their bill without haggling. Don't start fights with other customers. And if they do have a jab to deliver to another, they wait outside, far from the tavern, so that the poor host doesn't get caught in the middle. That's what I mean by honest men. But it's best if you know people well, like we four know each other. Now why in the world do you have so many questions when you're a bridegroom, and supposed to have something else on your mind? And before a plate of meatballs that would bring the dead back to life?"

With that he returned to the kitchen.

Our author, in remarking on the different ways the host answered questions, writes that he was the type of man who always claimed to be a great friend to all good people. In practice, however, he was much more polite to those who were reputed or appeared to be thugs. A real character, don't you agree?

The supper was not very cheerful. The two guests would have preferred to enjoy it at their leisure, but the man who had invited them, worried by the things the reader knows, was annoyed and even a little agitated by the odd behavior of those strangers, and

could not wait to leave. On their account, he spoke softly, in half sentences, and reluctantly.

"What a great thing," Gervaso suddenly burst out, "that Renzo wants to get married, and needs . . ." Renzo gave him a dirty look. Tonio said, "Shut up, you idiot!" accompanying the insult with a jab of his elbow. The conversation petered out after that. Renzo, lagging behind in his eating and drinking, was slow to refill the glasses of his two witnesses, pouring just enough to get them tipsy, but not so much as to get them drunk.

Once the table had been cleared and the bill paid by the man who had consumed the least, all three had to pass once again before those threatening faces, which turned toward Renzo, as they had when he first came in. A few steps past the tavern, he glanced back and saw that he was being followed by the two men he had left sitting in the kitchen. So he stopped, with his friends, as if to say: "Let's see what they want from me." When the two men realized they had been spotted, they also stopped, whispered to each other, and turned back.

If Renzo had been close enough to hear what they were saying, their words would have sounded very strange indeed. "But it would be a feather in our cap, not to mention the tip you'd get," said one of the villains, "if, back at the palace, we could tell them how we'd crushed his ribs, one-two-three, all by ourselves, without waiting for Griso's orders."

"And ruin the main plan?" his partner replied. "Quick, he's noticed something. He's looking at us. If only it were later! We'd better get back, to avoid arousing suspicion. People are still everywhere. Let's wait till they turn in."

They were surrounded, in fact, by the humming and buzzing you hear in a village toward evening, which just a short time later give way to the somber quiet of the night. The women were returning from the fields, carrying their babies in their arms and leading by the hand the older children, who had been told to recite their evening prayers while they walked. The men, too, were returning, with their shovels and hoes over their shoulders. As doors opened,

you could glimpse the flickering of fires that had been lit for their humble suppers. In the street, you could hear them exchanging greetings and a word or two on the scarcity of the harvest. And above their words you could hear the regular, sonorous tolling of the bell that announced the end of the day.

Renzo saw that the two spies had retreated. He continued on his way in the growing darkness, whispering one reminder, then another, first to one brother, then to the other. By the time they reached Lucia's cottage, it was already night.

Between the initial conception of a dreadful deed and the acting upon it (according to a barbarian who was not devoid of genius), all the interim is like a phantasma or a hideous dream.* For hours and hours, Lucia had been lying in the grips of just such a dream. Even Agnese, the author of the plan, was lost in thought, struggling to find the words to comfort her daughter. Yet at the moment of awakening, at the moment, in other words, for the deed to be done, the spirit finds itself wholly transformed. The struggle between terror and courage is succeeded by a new terror and new courage: The deed enters the mind like a wholly new apparition. Sometimes the things that had seemed most frightening suddenly become easy: At other times the obstacle that had been barely noticed appears larger than ever. The imagination retreats in dismay. The limbs refuse to obey. And courage falls short of the promises it had made so confidently.

At the soft knocking of Renzo, Lucia was gripped by such terror that she resolved, at that moment, to suffer anything, to be divided from him forever, rather than go through with their plan. But when he showed his face and said, "I'm here. It's time to go," and with everyone else ready to set out, without hesitation, to do something that was settled and irrevocable, Lucia had neither the time nor the strength to object. With an expression as if she were being forced

* The "barbarian" to whom Manzoni refers is Shakespeare, in Voltaire's memorable description, who is quoted here from *Julius Caesar,* act II, scene I, on the basis of the French translation.

against her will, she took her mother's arm, trembling, and her fiancé's, and joined the adventurous brigade.

Quietly quietly, through the shadows and in measured steps, they left the house and took the road leading away from the village. It would have been faster to cut across the village and go straight to Don Abbondio's house, but they chose the long way, to avoid being seen. Along the footpaths, through the vegetable gardens and fields, they arrived near the rectory, at which point they split up. The two fiancés hid around the corner. Agnese stayed behind with them, but in front, so she could rush out in time to stop Perpetua and keep her occupied. Tonio was with the half-wit Gervaso, who couldn't do anything by himself, but without whom nothing could be done. Adopting an innocent appearance, they knocked at the door.

"Who is it at this hour?" cried a voice from the window, which was flung open upon hearing the knocks. It was the voice of Perpetua. "No one is sick, that I know of. Has there been an accident, perhaps?"

"It's me," replied Tonio, "with my brother. We need to speak with the priest."

"Is this any time for good Christians to come calling?" was Perpetua's brusque reply. "Where are your manners? Come back tomorrow!"

"Listen. Maybe I'll come back, maybe I won't. I've got some money here, and I was stopping by to settle up that debt you may have heard about. I've got twenty-five new *berlingas* here.* But if I can't see him, never mind. I know where to spend my money, and I'll come back when I've saved some more."

"Wait a moment, wait. I'll be right back. But why are you coming at this hour of the night?"

"I just got the money a little while ago. And I thought, like I was telling you, that if I stuff it in the mattress, I don't know how I might

* The *berlinga* was a silver coin used as currency in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Milan, worth twenty *soldi* at the time.

feel tomorrow. But if it's too late for you, I don't know. Me, I'm here. If you don't want to see me, I'll go."

"No, no, wait a moment. I'll be right back with an answer." With these words she closed the window. At this point Agnese broke away from the young couple. She whispered to Lucia, "Be brave. This will only take a moment. Like pulling a tooth," and joined the two brothers by the door. She started chatting with Tonio, so that when Perpetua came to open, she would think Agnese had happened upon them by chance, and Tonio had detained her for a moment.

Chapter 8

"Carneades! Now, who in the world was he?" Don Abbondio was muttering to himself, as he sat in his chair in an upstairs room, a small book open in front of him, when Perpetua came in to deliver the message. "Carneades! I'm sure I've seen that name somewhere. He must have been a great scholar, some ancient know-it-all. It's one of those names. But who in the world was he?"* That's how oblivious the poor man was of the storm gathering over his head.

You should know that Don Abbondio enjoyed doing a bit of reading every day. A neighboring priest, who had a few books on a shelf, would lend him this or that volume, wherever his hand happened to fall. The one Don Abbondio was meditating on in that moment, while convalescing from his fear-induced fever (though he had already recovered more completely than he'd admit) was a panegyric in honor of Saint Carlo Borromeo that had been delivered with great feeling, and heard with great admiration, at the Milan cathedral two years earlier. In it the saint was compared, for his love of learning, to Archimedes. This much Don Abbondio could handle, since Archimedes had done such odd things, and was so well known, that it didn't take a lot of schooling to know a thing or two about him. But then the orator had to go and compare him to Carneades. And here our reader had run aground. That was when Perpetua came in to announce the visit of Tonio.

* Carneades (214–129/8 B.C.E.), a Greek philosopher renowned for his expertise in skepticism, eventually became the head of the Academy founded by Plato.

"At this hour?" Don Abbondio also said, as was only natural.

"What do you expect. They've got no manners. But if you don't catch him now . . ."

"You're right. If I don't catch him now, who knows when I will? Send him up . . . Wait, wait. Are you quite sure it's him?"

"Of course I am!" replied Perpetua, and headed downstairs. She opened the door and glanced around, asking, "Now where did you get to?" Tonio appeared, and at the same moment, so did Agnese. She came forward and greeted Perpetua by name.

"Good evening, Agnese," said Perpetua, "where are you coming from at this hour of the night?"

"I'm coming from . . ." and she named a nearby village. "And wouldn't you know it," she continued, "I stayed longer than I expected, all on your account."

"Oh? How is that?" asked Perpetua. Turning to the two brothers she said, "Go on in, I'll be right up."

"Because," Agnese replied, "one of those women who love to talk about things they know nothing about . . . can you believe it? She had the nerve to say that you didn't end up marrying Beppe Suolavecchia, or Anselmo Lunghigna, because they wouldn't have you.* Well, I told her that you were the one who turned them down, first one and then the other . . ."

"Wouldn't you know it! Oh, that liar! That big fat liar! Tell me her name!"

"Please don't ask. I don't want to cause any trouble."

"But you have to tell me, you owe it to me. Oh, that liar!"

"Not another word . . . you can't imagine how sorry I was not to know the whole story, so I could set her straight."

"Can you believe the things people make up!" Perpetua exclaimed again. She quickly added, "As for Beppe, everyone knows and could see for themselves . . . Ah, Tonio. Come in and go right

* The names are comical: Suolavecchia means "old shoe" while a lunghina is the rope used to lead a horse.

on up, I'll be there in a second." From inside, Tonio answered yes, and Perpetua continued her passionate tale.

Across from Don Abbondio's front door, there was a path between two modest cottages that led into a field. Agnese headed in that direction, as if she wanted to go somewhere private so she could speak more freely. Perpetua followed close behind. Once they'd turned the corner and were in a spot where you couldn't see what was happening at Don Abbondio's house, Agnese gave a loud cough. That was the signal. Renzo heard it, gave Lucia's arm an encouraging squeeze, and both of them came forward, on tiptoe, creeping close to the wall. When they got to the door, they gave it a gentle push, quiet as mice, and entered the vestibule where the two brothers were waiting. Renzo closed the door behind him, softly softly, and all four went up the stairs without making a sound. Once they had reached the landing, the two brothers approached the door to Don Abbondio's room, which was right by the stairs. The bride and groom flattened themselves against the wall.

"*Deo gratias*," said Tonio in a clear voice.

"Tonio, is that you? Come in," replied the voice from inside. The summoned man opened the door just wide enough for him and his brother to slip through, one after the other. A ray of light shone through the crack, painting a white stripe on the dark floor of the landing, and giving Lucia a start, as if she had been discovered. Once the brothers were inside, Tonio closed the door behind him. The bride and groom stood still in the shadows, their ears pricked, holding their breath. The loudest sound was the pounding of Lucia's poor heart.

Don Abbondio was sitting on an old chair, as we were saying, in the dim light of a small oil lamp, ensconced in an old dressing gown, with an old skullcap on his head that framed his face. Two thick tufts of hair that slipped out from under the skullcap, two thick eyebrows, a thick mustache, and a thick goatee, all white and scattered over his dark wrinkled face, looked like snow-covered bushes sprouting from a cliff in the clear moonlight.

"Aha!" was his greeting, as he removed his glasses and placed them inside his book.

"The Reverend Father will say I'm late," said Tonio, bowing, as did Gervaso, but more awkwardly.

"Obviously you're late. In more ways than one. Don't you realize that I'm sick?"

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"You must have heard. I'm sick and don't know when I can appear in public again . . . But why did you bring along that . . . that boy?"

"To keep me company, Father."

"All right now, let's have a look."

"Here's twenty-five new berlingas, the ones with Saint Ambrose on horseback," said Tonio, removing a pouch from his pocket.*

"Let's have a look," repeated Don Abbondio. Taking the pouch, he put his glasses back on, opened it, fished out the berlingas, counted them, turned them over, turned them over again, and found no signs of counterfeiting.

"Now you'll give me back my Tecla's necklace, Father."

"What's fair is fair," replied Don Abbondio. He went to a cupboard, dug a key out of his pocket, and looking around as if to shield himself from curious eyes, opened one side of the door, covered the opening with his body, stuck his head inside, for a look, and his arm, to get the necklace. He took it, closed the cupboard, and gave it to Tonio, saying, "Are you happy now?"

"Would you mind putting it in writing?" Tonio asked.

"That, too!" said Don Abbondio. "They know every trick in the book. My, how suspicious the world has become. Don't you trust me?"

"Of course I do, Reverend Father. You've got me wrong. But

* The berlinga was a silver coin used in Milan in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, etched, on one side, with the figure of Saint Ambrose, the patron saint of the city.

since my name is in your little black book, in the debit column . . . Well, since you've gone to the trouble of writing it once, then . . . it's a short step from life to death . . ."

"Fine, fine," interrupted Don Abbondio. Grumbling, he pulled open a desk drawer, removed pen, inkpot, and a sheet of paper, and started writing, repeating aloud the words as they emerged from his pen. Meanwhile Tonio, and at his cue Gervaso, stood right in front of the desk, to block the scribe's view of the door. Pretending to be idle, they shuffled their feet on the floor, giving the signal to the two outside to come in, and at the same time covering up the sound of the couple's footsteps. Don Abbondio, immersed in his writing, noticed nothing. At the shuffling of the four feet, Renzo took one of Lucia's arms, gave it another encouraging squeeze, and stepped forward, pulling her behind him. She was shaking so badly that she couldn't have moved on her own. They came in slowly slowly, on tiptoe, holding their breath, and hid behind the two brothers. In the meantime Don Abbondio carefully reread what he had written, without lifting his eyes from the paper. He folded it in four saying, "Are you happy now?" Removing his glasses from his nose with one hand, he handed the paper to Tonio with the other, and looked up. Tonio, stretching out his hand to take it, stepped to one side, while Gervaso, at a nod from his brother, stepped to the other. And in the middle, like a scene on which a curtain has opened, Renzo and Lucia appeared. Don Abbondio got a blurry and then a clear view of them. He was shocked, astounded, infuriated. He deliberated and came to a decision. All in the time it took Renzo to say the words, "Reverend Father, in the presence of these witnesses, this is my wife."

His lips had barely come to rest when Don Abbondio, dropping the piece of paper, grabbed and picked up the lamp with his left hand, and yanked the table cover with his right, pulling it toward himself angrily, sending the book, paper, inkpot, and sand tumbling to the floor. Springing between the chair and the desk, he ran toward Lucia. The poor girl, in her soft and now trembling voice, had just begun to utter the words, "And this . . ." when Don Abbondio rudely

threw the table cover over her head and face, to keep her from pronouncing the complete formula. Having dropped the lamp he'd been holding, he used that hand to gag her with the cloth, almost suffocating her. And all the while he kept shouting at the top of his lungs, "Perpetua! Perpetua! Treachery! Help!"

The wick of the lamp dying on the floor cast a dim flickering light on Lucia, who, in a state of complete panic, did not even try to disentangle herself. She looked like a roughly modeled clay statue over which the artist had thrown a damp rag. With the lights out, Don Abbondio let go of the poor girl and felt his way toward the door to the next room. Once he found it he entered, locked himself inside, and continued to shout, "Perpetua! Help!"

In the front room, everything was in an uproar. Renzo, groping around with his hands like in a game of blindman's bluff, was trying to stop the priest. At last he found the door and pounded on it, shouting, "Open up! Open up! Don't make such a scene!" Lucia was calling to Renzo in a faint voice, "Please, please, we have to leave, for the love of God." Tonio was crawling about on all fours, sweeping the floor with his hands, trying to find his receipt. And Gervaso was jumping up and down and shouting, like a man possessed, looking for the doorway to the stairs and an escape to safety.

In the midst of all this pandemonium, I cannot resist pausing for a moment of reflection. Renzo—who had snuck into another man's house, was holding him hostage, and was raising a ruckus at night—looked for all the world like the aggressor. Don Abbondio, ambushed, forced to flee, and terrorized while he was attending peacefully to his own business, looked like the victim. In reality, however, he was the aggressor. Such is often the way of the world . . . I mean, the way of the world in the seventeenth century.

The besieged man, seeing that his enemy showed no signs of retreating, opened a window that gave onto the church square, and started shouting, "Help! Help!" The moon shone brightly. The shadow of the church, and farther ahead, the longer and sharper shadow of the bell tower, cast a dark shape across the illuminated grass plane of the piazza. Every object stood out distinctly, as if it

were day. Yet there was no sign of a living soul as far as the eye could see. Attached to the wall of the church, on the side facing the rectory, there was a humble abode, a closet, really, where the sacristan slept. He was woken up by the wild cries, jumped out of bed in a frenzy, opened the canvas shade covering one of his little windows, and stuck his head out. With his eyes half shut, he called out, "What's wrong?"

"Quick, Ambrogio! Help! There's people in my house!" Don Abbondio shouted.

"I'm coming right away," the sacristan replied. He pulled his head back in, closed the shade, and although half-asleep and more than half-cocked, he was able to come up with a solution on the spur of the moment, one that would provide even more help than requested, without drawing him into the fray, whatever the trouble might be. He grabs hold of his britches, which he kept on the bed, tucks them under his arm like a three-cornered hat, and scrambles down a wooden ladder. He runs to the bell tower, grabs a hold of the rope to the larger of the two bells, and starts yanking away.

"Dong, dong, dong, dong." The peasants sit up in their beds with a start. The field hands sleeping in the haylofts prick up their ears and jump to their feet. "What's that? The bell sounding the alarm? Fire? Thieves? Bandits?" Many of the women advise, or rather, beg their husbands not to budge, to let others rush out. Some of the men get up and go to the window. The lazy ones, as if yielding to their wives' pleas, crawl back under the covers. The braver and more curious go downstairs to grab their pitchforks and muskets, and run toward the sound. Still others wait to see.

Before the peasants had heeded the call, even before they were fully awake, the sound of the bells had reached the ears of other groups who, already up and dressed, were keeping vigil not far away: the bravi, in one place, and Agnese and Perpetua in another. Let me briefly fill you in on what the first group had been up to since last we saw them, with one division in the ruined house, the other at the tavern. Once the three at the tavern saw that the doors

to all the houses were closed and the street deserted, they hurried out quickly, as if they suddenly realized how late it was, saying they wanted to get home right away. They conducted a final survey of the village, to make sure that everyone had turned in. Not a living soul, not the slightest sound. They also sneaked past our poor little cottage, the quietest house in the village, since no one was home. Then they went straight to the ruined house and delivered their report to Griso. He immediately stuck an old hat on his head, tossed an oilcloth wrap covered with seashells around his shoulders, grabbed a pilgrim's staff, and said, "Time to make our move, bravi: Keep your mouths shut, and remember your orders."* He went first and the others followed. In a minute they were at the cottage, by the opposite route taken by our little brigade, which was off on its own expedition.

Griso held his troops a few yards back, and went ahead by himself to scout around. Seeing the house deserted and quiet from the outside, he gestured to two of his henchmen to come forward, gave them the order to climb very carefully over the wall surrounding the courtyard and, once inside, to hide in a corner, behind a bushy fig tree he had spotted that morning. Then he knocked very softly, intending to say that he was a lost pilgrim seeking shelter until daybreak. No answer. He knocks again, a little louder. Not a peep. He goes to call a third member of his gang, gets him to slip into the courtyard like the other two, with orders to slowly detach the bolt from the door, so they can easily get in and out.

Everything is done with the utmost caution and is rewarded with solid success. Griso calls to the others, and sends them over the wall to hide with the first three. He closes the front gate stealthily and posts two sentinels inside. Then he goes straight to the garden door. He knocks there, too, and waits, as well he would have to. Very

* Griso put on a *sanrocchino*—named after Saint Roch, a protector against the plague—a short coat worn by pilgrims to which they would sew souvenirs of the pilgrimages they had made, in this case, to a seaside shrine.

carefully he detaches the bolt on that door, as well. No one calls out, "Who's there?" from inside. No one makes a sound. Things couldn't go more smoothly. Next step. "Psst!" he calls to the men behind the fig tree, and with them, enters the ground-floor room, where that morning he had treacherously begged for a piece of bread. He takes out his tinderbox, lights a lantern he has brought, and goes into the next room to see if anyone is there: no one. He turns back, goes to the bottom of the stairs, looks, listens: solitude and silence. He leaves two other sentries on the ground floor and asks Laughless, a bravo from the Bergamo countryside, to follow him. Laughless's job was to do the threatening, the silencing, and the ordering: all the talking, in short, so that his accent would make Agnese think the gang had come from Bergamo.* With Laughless by his side and the others behind, Griso climbs the stairs softly, cursing in his heart at the sound of every squeaky stair and every henchman's footstep. He is finally at the top. Their victim's nest. He softly pushes the door to the front room. It yields, opens a crack. He pokes his head inside: All is pitch-black. He puts his ear against the opening, to listen for anyone snoring, breathing, or moving about: nothing. Next step. Holding the lantern right in front of his face to see without being seen, he pushes the door wide open, sees a bed, and is upon it. The bed is all smooth and made, with the border of the blanket folded over the pillows. He shrugs his shoulders, turns to his companions, signals to them that he is going to check the other room, and that they should follow him nice and slowly. He enters, follows the same ritual, comes up with the same results. "What the devil is this?" he says. "Did some dirty rat squeal on us?" Everyone starts looking around a little less cautiously, poking into every corner, turning the place upside down.

While they're busy doing this, the two sentinels at the front gate hear the pitter-patter of hurried steps coming closer and closer.

* Although Bergamo is only about twenty-five miles from Lecco, its inhabitants speak a separate dialect, with a distinctive accent.

Imagining that whoever it might be will likely pass by, they fall silent but remain alert. The footsteps come to a stop right at the gate. It's Menico, the neighbor boy, who has come running to deliver Padre Cristoforo's warning to the two women to flee from their home, immediately, for the love of heaven, and take refuge at the monastery, because . . . well, you know why. He lifts the latch to the bolt, to knock, and feels it dangling in his hand, detached and torn out. "What's this?" he thinks, and gives a fearful push to the door: It opens. Menico sets one foot inside, very warily, and suddenly feels someone grab both arms while two muffled voices, one on his right and one on his left, say in a threatening voice: "Be quiet or be dead!" Instead the boy lets loose a scream. One of the villains places a hand over his mouth. The other takes out his dagger to scare him. The boy shakes like a leaf, and doesn't even try to shout. But all at once, the first tolling of the bell is heard, followed by a steady pealing. "Suspicion always haunts the guilty mind," a wise man once said. Both villains thought they heard the bells ringing out their first and last names, as well as their nicknames: They let go of Menico's arms, free his hands and mouth, look each other in the face, then race toward the ruined house where most of the troop has gathered. Menico hightails it out to the street, heading for the bell tower, where there were bound to be people.

The dreadful tolling had the same effect on the scoundrels ransacking the cottage from top to bottom. They were startled and bewildered, crashing into each other as each looked for the quickest way out. Although they were all men used to staring danger in the face, they were petrified by a danger they could not see, nearby, that might suddenly descend upon them. It took all of Griso's authority to keep them together in orderly retreat rather than mad flight. Like a dog herding pigs, running this way and that after each stray animal, grabbing one by the ear and dragging him back inside, prodding another with his muzzle, and barking at another to get him in line, the false pilgrim grabs hold of one bravo who is already halfway out the door, and yanks him back in. He uses his walking

stick to drive back this man or that heading in the same direction. He shouts at the others who are running about aimlessly. Finally he manages to scrape them together in the middle of the courtyard. "Quick, quick! Pistols in hand, knives out, all together, then we'll leave. That's how it's done. Who do you think will come near us if we stay together, you idiots! But if we let them snatch us one by one, even the peasants will start thrashing us. Shame on you all! Line up behind me, as one!" After this short harangue, he took the lead and was the first one out. The cottage, as I said, was on the far side of the village. Griso took the outbound road and the others filed behind him.

Let us send them on their way and take a step back to catch up with Agnese and Perpetua, whom we had left on a certain path. Agnese had managed to get the maid as far from Don Abbondio's house as she could, and for a while, her plan had gone well. That is, until Perpetua remembered that she had left the door open and wanted to go back. There was no talking her out of it. To avoid raising her suspicions, Agnese had to turn around with her and follow, trying to hold her back every time she saw an opportunity to get Perpetua more upset over the story of marriages gone up in smoke. She pretended to hang onto Perpetua's every word, and, now and again, to show she was paying attention or to revive the gossip, she would interject words like, "naturally," "now I understand," "but of course," "obviously," "and then?" "what about him?" "and you?"

In the meantime, Agnese was carrying on an entirely different conversation with herself. "Will they be out by now? Or will they still be inside? We were idiots not to agree on a signal to let me know when the deed was done! What a mistake! Well, it's too late now. The best I can do is keep her away as long as I can. Worse comes to worst, I'll have wasted a little time."

This stopping and going brought them close to the house of Don Abbondio, which still couldn't be seen, however, since it was around the bend. Perpetua, at a crucial point in the story, put up no resistance to being held in place, and was indeed unaware of the ele-

ments being used against her, when all of a sudden they could hear, echoing from above in the motionless void of the sky, through the vast silence of the night, the first desperate cries of Don Abbondio: "Help! Help!"

"Saints in heaven, what was that?" shouted Perpetua, wanting to run.

"What can it be? What can it be?" said Agnese, grabbing hold of her skirt.

"Saints in heaven, didn't you hear?" replied the other, breaking loose.

"What is it? What is it?" repeated Agnese, grabbing hold of her arm.

"You devil!" exclaimed Perpetua, pushing the other woman away to free herself. She started running when, from farther away, but shriller and more immediate, came the cries of Menico.

"Saints in heaven!" shouted Agnese, in turn, galloping after the other woman.

They had just picked up their heels when the bells started tolling. One stroke, two, three, and then on and on. The bells would have spurred the women on, as if they needed it. Perpetua arrived at Don Abbondio's house a moment before Agnese. While she was pushing on the door, it opened from the inside, and who should appear on the threshold but Tonio, Gervaso, Renzo, and Lucia. Having finally found the stairs, they had come racing down in leaps and bounds. Hearing the dreadful tolling of the bells, they had run as fast as they could to safety.

"What is it? What is it?" Perpetua asked the brothers, gasping for breath. Their only reply was to shove her to the side and run. "And you two, what are you doing here?" she asked Renzo and Lucia, once she recognized them. But they, too, left without a word. Perpetua, in a hurry to be where she was most needed, asked no more questions. She dashed into the corridor and raced toward the stairs as best she could in the dark.

The still unmarried couple found themselves facing Agnese,

who arrived huffing and puffing. "Ah, you're here!" she said, struggling to get the words out. "How did it go? Why are the bells tolling? I thought I heard . . ."

"Let's go home," said Renzo, "before people get here." No sooner had they started off when Menico came running, spotted them, and still shaking all over, asked in a choked voice, "Where are you going? Turn around. This way. To the monastery!"

"Are you the one who . . . ?" Agnese started to ask.

"What now?" asked Renzo..

Lucia, overwhelmed and trembling, was dumbstruck.

"There's a devil in the house," gasped Menico, "I saw them myself. They tried to kill me. Padre Cristoforo told me. He said to come right away. You, too, Renzo. And then I saw them. It's sheer luck that I've found you all here! I'll tell you everything later, when we're away from the village."

Renzo, who was the most levelheaded of the group, thought that, whatever direction they took, they'd better take it immediately, before people started arriving. The safest thing was to do what Menico advised—or rather ordered—with all the force of a frightened boy. Once they were on their way and out of danger, they could ask him for a more complete explanation. "Keep walking," Renzo told Menico. "Follow him," he told the women. They turned and walked quickly toward the church, crossed the square, where, thank heavens, not a living soul was around, and entered an alley between the church and Don Abbondio's house. At the first gap in the hedge, they slipped through and out into the fields.

The quartet had gone maybe fifty yards when the villagers began filling up the town square; the crowd swelled by the minute. Everyone looked into one another's faces with a question. No one had an answer. The first to arrive ran to the door of the church. Locked. They ran to the bell tower. One man placed his mouth over a small window, a slit, really, and bellowed, "What the devil is going on?" When Ambrogio heard a voice he recognized, he let go of the rope. Reassured by the hubbub that many people had gathered, he answered, "I'm coming to open up." He quickly slipped

into the garment he had tucked under his arm, and unlocked the door.

"What's all this ruckus?" "What?" "Where?" "Who?"

"What do you mean who?" said Ambrogio, with one hand holding a side of the door, and the other on the hem of the breeches he'd put on so hastily. "What? You don't know? People in the priest's house! Be brave, boys. To the rescue." They all turned and swarmed toward the house, keeping their ears pricked. All quiet. Others ran to the door. It was locked and seemed to be undamaged. They looked up. Not a window was open.

"Anyone home? Reverend Father! Reverend Father!"

Don Abbondio had just realized that his assailants were gone, stepped back from the window, and shut it. In that moment he was squabbling in a low voice with Perpetua, who had left him alone in this mess. When he heard his name being called by the voice of the people, he had to go back to the window. Seeing the huge rescue operation underway, he regretted having sounded the alarm.

"What happened?" "What did they do to you?" "Who are they?" "Where did they go?" fifty voices shouted as one.

"They're all gone. But thank you. You can go home now."

"But who was it?" "Where did they go?" "What happened?"

"People up to no good, the kind that come out at night. But they escaped. Go home, they're gone. Another time, my children. Thank you for your kindness." And saying this, he stepped back and closed the window once more. Some people started to grumble, some to jeer, some to curse. Others shrugged their shoulders and were about to leave when a man arrived, huffing and puffing, barely able to form words. He lived in the house almost directly opposite Agnese and Lucia. Hearing a noise from their cottage, he had leaned out his window and seen the bravi scattering in the courtyard while Griso struggled to round them up. "What are you doing, boys?" he cried after catching his breath, "The devil isn't here. He's at the other end of the street, at Agnese Mondella's place. Armed men are inside. It looks like they're trying to kill a pilgrim. Who knows what the devil they're up to!"

"What? What?" A tumultuous assembly began. "We have to go!" "We have to see!" "How many of them are there?" "How many are we?" "Who are they?" "The Consul! Get the Consul!"*

"Here I am," replied the Consul from within the crowd. "Here I am. But if you want to help me, you have to follow orders. Quick. Where's the sacristan? To the bells, to the bells! Quick. Someone run to Lecco for help. Gather around now . . ."

Some ran, some squeezed their way through the crowd to escape. A second man arrived who had seen the bravi making their getaway, and shouted, "Hurry, boys, hurry! Someone's making off with a pilgrim. Thieves or bandits. They've already left the village. After them! After them!" At this announcement, without awaiting their captain's orders, the crowd swarmed down the street. While this army advanced, some of the leaders deliberately slowed their pace, allowing the men behind them to come to the front while they themselves disappeared into the rear. The motley crew finally reached its destination.

The traces of the invasion were fresh and plain to see: The front gate was wide open, the bolt torn off. But the invaders had disappeared. Entering the courtyard, the garden door is also wide open and its bolt torn off. Voices call out, "Agnese!" "Lucia!" "The pilgrim, where's the pilgrim?" "The pilgrim must've been imagined by Stefano!" "No, no. Carlandrea saw him, too." "Pilgrim, where are you?" "Agnese?" "Lucia?" No one answers. "They've been kidnapped!" "They've been kidnapped!"

At that point, some men raised their voices to propose that everyone pursue the kidnappers. It was an act of infamy! A disgrace to the village if any old scoundrel could come by and make off with the women, like a hawk stealing chicks from a deserted barnyard. Another, more tumultuous, assembly was held. Someone in the brigade (exactly who, no one ever found out) started a rumor that Agnese and Lucia had taken refuge in a house. The rumor spread

* The Consul was appointed by the Spanish authorities to head a rural community.

quickly and gained credibility, until all talk of pursuing the fugitives was dropped, and the brigade broke up, each man returning to his own home. There was a murmuring, a din, a knocking and opening of doors, an appearing and disappearing of lamps, a questioning by women from the windows, an answering from down below. The street was deserted and silent again, the discussions continued in the houses, then settled down amid yawns, to resume the next day.

There were no more incidents, except for one the following morning. The Consul was standing in his field, chin in his hand, elbow resting on the handle of his shovel, which was half dug in the ground, with one foot propped on the top edge. As I was saying, he stood there reflecting on the previous night's mysteries, and on the lowest common denominator between what he should do and what he would rather do. Coming toward him, he saw two strapping men with hair like highborn Frankish kings, men who closely resembled the pair (though it was not them) who had accosted Don Abbondio five days earlier. With an even less ceremonious manner than those two, they informed the Consul that he should think twice before delivering any report on the events of the previous night to the Mayor, that if questioned he should not tell the truth, and that he should not talk or encourage the talk of the villagers, if he hoped to die in bed one day of natural causes.

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For a while our fugitives continued at a brisk pace, in silence, turning around, now one, now the other, to make sure they weren't being followed. All three were exhausted from the escape, the racing of their hearts, anxiety over their present state, sadness over their failed mission, and a vague apprehension over the new and unknown danger. Their exhaustion was increased by the constant pursuit of the bells, which, as they grew softer and duller in the distance, began to take on a more gloomy and sinister sound.

The tolling finally stopped. The fugitives, finding themselves in an uninhabited field and hearing not even a breeze, started to slow down. The first to break the silence, after she had caught her breath,

was Agnese, by asking Renzo what had happened, and questioning Menico about the devil in her house. Renzo told his sad story quickly. All three of them then turned to the boy, who reported the friar's warning in more detail, and told them what he himself had seen and risked, which unfortunately confirmed the warning. The listeners understood this better than Menico, and it made their blood run cold. All three of them stopped at the same time, and looked at one another in shock. In a spontaneous gesture, they reached out to place a hand on the boy's head or his shoulders, as if to caress him and thank him wordlessly for having been their guardian angel, and to show how sorry they were for the distress he had suffered.

"You should go home now, so your parents don't worry about you," Agnese told him. Remembering the two coins she had promised, she took four from her pocket and gave them to him, adding, "There. I pray to God we will see each other again soon. And then . . ." Renzo gave him another berlinga, and made him promise not to breathe a word about the message the friar had delivered. Lucia hugged him and wished him goodbye with her heart in her throat. The boy said an affectionate farewell to everyone, and turned back.

The three continued on their way, lost in thought: the women first, and Renzo behind, as if he were guarding them. Lucia clung to her mother's arm and refused, gently but deftly, the hand the young man offered her on the trickiest patches of their trip through the fields. Even amid this turmoil, she was ashamed of having spent so much time alone with him, and so intimately, rather than waiting to become his wife, which should have been so simple. Now that the dream had vanished so painfully, she feared she had gone too far, and regretted it. Of the many reasons for which she trembled, one was the modesty born not from a guilty acquaintance with sin, but rather from naïveté, like the fears of a child who trembles in the shadows without knowing why.

"What about my house?" Agnese suddenly asked. Although the question was important, no one answered, because no one could

provide a satisfactory reply. They continued on their way in silence, and soon, at last, they came out into the piazza in front of the monastery's church.

Renzo went to the door and gave it a good push. It opened and the moon, shining through the crack, illuminated the pale face and silver beard of Padre Cristoforo, who had been standing there waiting. Seeing that no one was missing, he said, "Thank God," and gestured for them to come in. Next to him was another Capuchin, the lay sacristan, whom, through pleading and reasoning, he had persuaded to wait up with him, leave the door slightly ajar, and be ready to welcome in the poor endangered souls. It took all the friar's authority and his saintly reputation to obtain this inconvenient, dangerous, and irregular compliance from the lay brother. Once they were all inside, Padre Cristoforo closed the door behind them very quietly. At that the sacristan could no longer contain himself. Taking the padre aside, he whispered in his ear, "But, Padre, Padre! At night . . . in the church . . . with women . . . closing . . . the rules . . . but, Padre!" and he shook his head. As he listened to the man struggling to get the words out, Padre Cristoforo thought, "Will you look at this. Had it been a fugitive from justice, Fra Fazio wouldn't have given it a second thought. But a poor innocent girl, escaping from the clutches of a wolf . . ." "*Omnia munda mundis,*" he said, suddenly turning toward Fra Fazio, forgetting that the man did not understand Latin.* This lapse made all the difference. If he had tried to reason with him, the brother would have found a hundred counterarguments, and heaven knows how and when the debate would have ended. But hearing those grave words with their mysterious meaning, and uttered so resolutely, made Fra Fazio feel as if all of his doubts had been settled. He quieted down and said, "All right, then. I'll take your word for it."

"You can trust me," answered Padre Cristoforo. In the flickering light of the lamp burning before the altar, he approached the refu-

* *Omnia munda mundis,* from the Epistle of Saint Paul to Titus, 1:15: "Unto the pure all things are pure."

gees, who had been standing there anxiously, and said to them, "Children, thank the Lord, who has delivered you from a grave danger. If things had gone differently . . ." And here he started to explain at length what he had told the little messenger in brief. He didn't suspect that they knew more than him, and assumed that Menico had found them at home in peace, before the crooks arrived. No one corrected his misunderstanding, not even Lucia, who felt a slight remorse over deceiving such a man, but it had been a night of treachery and tricks.

"After this," he continued, "the village is no longer safe for you, my children. You were born here, you have never harmed anyone, but this is what God has ordained. It is a test, my children. Bear it with patience, with trust, and without hatred. And know that the day shall come when you will make peace with what is happening now. I have arranged a temporary refuge for you. Very soon, I hope, you will be able to return safely to your home. Whatever happens, God will provide, and for the best. And I will do my utmost to be worthy of the grace He has granted me, in choosing me as His minister, in the service of you poor, dear afflicted souls."

Turning to the two women, "You," he continued, "can stay in ***. There you will be beyond the reach of danger, and at the same time not too far from your home. Go to our monastery there, ask for the Father Guardian, and give him this letter. For you, he will be like another Padre Cristoforo. And you, too, dear Renzo, you must seek protection from the anger of others, as well as your own. Bring this letter to Padre Bonaventura of Lodi, at our monastery at Porta Orientale in Milan. He will act as your father, guide you, and find you work, until you can return here to live in peace. Go to the lakeshore, near the mouth of the Bione, a river not far from Pescarenico. There you'll see a boat docked. Call out 'Boat.' You'll hear, 'Who for.' Answer, 'Saint Francis.' The boat'll take you on board and carry you to the opposite shore, where a cart will be waiting to take you all the way to ***."

Anyone who wonders how Padre Cristoforo was able to arrange for all of this transportation, by land and by water, and so quickly,

obviously doesn't know the power of a Capuchin monk reputed to be a saint.

There was still the custody of the houses to consider. The padre agreed to hold on to the keys, and to hand them over to whomever Renzo and Agnese indicated. Agnese, removing her keys from her pocket, sighing deeply to think of her house unlocked, the devil inside, and God knows what was even left to take care of.

"Before you leave," said the priest, "let us all pray to the Lord, so that he may accompany you on this journey, now and forever. Above all that he may give you the strength and the charity to want what he wants for you." So saying, he knelt down in the middle of the church, and everyone knelt with him. After they had prayed in silence for a few moments, the priest, in a soft but clear voice, uttered these words: "We pray to you also for the poor sinner who has brought us to this pass. We would be unworthy of your mercy if we did not beseech you, from our hearts, to think of him, who has such great need of it. Despite our tribulations, we can find consolation in being on the path on which you have set us. We can offer up to you our troubles, for which we shall be rewarded. But him!... He is your enemy, the wretch, and he defies You! Take pity on him, oh Lord. Touch his heart and reconcile him to You. Grant him all the blessings that we can wish for ourselves."

Then, standing up quickly, he said, "Come, children, there's no time to waste. God will watch over you. His angel will accompany you. Go now." As they rose, with an emotion for which there are no words, but can express itself without them, the priest added, in an altered tone of voice, "My heart tells me we shall soon meet again."

The heart, of course, to those who heed it, always has some wisdom to share about the future. But what does the heart know? Only a fraction of that which has already happened.

Without awaiting an answer, Padre Cristoforo headed for the sacristy. The travelers left the church and Fra Fazio closed the door, bidding them farewell, also in an altered tone. Renzo, Lucia, and Agnese proceeded, quietly quietly, to the shore where they had been directed. They saw the boat waiting for them, exchanged the

password, and boarded. With one oar, the boatman pushed off from the shore. Rowing the other with two arms, he headed toward the beach on the opposite side. Not a breeze stirred the air. The lake lay smooth and flat, and would have appeared motionless but for the slight trembling and rippling of the moon, which was mirrored in the water from the sky above. The only sound you could hear was the dull lapping and slow splashing of the waves over the pebbles on the beach, the more distant gurgling of the water breaking around the piers of the bridge, and the rhythmic slapping of the two oars slicing the blue surface of the lake, coming up dripping, and dipping back in again. The wake of the boat formed a rippled streak behind the stern as the boat drew farther and farther away from the lido. The silent passengers, twisting their heads to look back, gazed at the mountains and the moonlit village, dappled in places by broad shadows. They could make out the houses, the huts. Don Rodrigo's big palace, with its flat tower rising above the pile of humble dwellings on the hillside of the promontory, standing upright in the shadows; his house looked like a cruel master in the midst of a slumbering group, both keeping vigil and contemplating a crime. Lucia saw it and shivered. She allowed her eyes to slowly follow the descent of the slope to their little village. Gazing at the far end, she could see her cottage, the thick foliage of the fig tree rising above the courtyard wall, and the window of her room. Sitting, as she was, in the bottom of the boat, she rested her arm on the edge, laid her face on her arm as if to sleep, and wept to herself.

Farewell mountains rising from the waters and reaching to the sky; jagged peaks familiar to one who has grown up among you, etched in her mind no less clearly than the faces of those she holds dear. Farewell rivers, whose roaring she knows as well as the voices of home. Farewell small white villages, clinging to the slopes like flocks of grazing sheep. Nothing could be sadder than the footsteps of one who, having grown up among you, must take her leave! Such a moment crushes the fantasies of a man who departs freely, dreaming of seeking his fortune elsewhere. Dismayed to have ever resolved such a thing, he would turn back but for his dreams of wealth.

The more he advances across the plain, the more his weary eyes are repelled by the unending sameness. The air feels heavy and dead. Dejected and confused, he enters the tumultuous city, unable to breathe amid house after house, street after street. Standing before buildings admired by many a foreigner, he thinks, with restless desire, of the fields in his home village, the little house that caught his eye long ago, which he will buy once he returns to his mountains, a wealthy man.

But what about a girl who has never nursed even a fleeting desire to leave the mountains? Who has pictured her future in that setting, only to be cast out by a perverse force! Torn in a single moment from her most cherished habits and fondest hopes. She leaves the mountains behind to follow in the footsteps of strangers she had no wish to meet, unable to even imagine the moment when she might return.

Farewell childhood home, where lost in private thoughts, she had learned to hear the difference between normal footsteps and the footsteps of the youth she awaited with a mysterious fear. Farewell home she might never know, at which she had stolen many a blushing glance; the home where she had envisioned a married life, serene and lifelong. Farewell church, where peace of mind had so often returned while singing the Lord's praises. Where her marriage banns had been posted and the Mass prepared. Where the secret yearning of her heart was supposed to be solemnly blessed and love ordained and made holy. Farewell! He who gave you such bliss is everywhere and would never trouble the joy of his children, except to make it more certain and great.

Such was the nature, though not the letter, of Lucia's thoughts, which differed only slightly from those of her two fellow pilgrims, as the boat brought them closer to the right bank of the Adda.

Chapter 9

The boat's impact against the shore shook Lucia from her thoughts. After discreetly drying her tears, she raised her head as if she had just woken up. Renzo climbed out of the boat first. He held out his hand to Agnese, who then offered her hand to her daughter. All three sadly thanked the boatman. "For what," he replied, "we are here on this earth to help one another." He pulled his hand away, almost with distaste, as if he had been asked to commit a crime, when Renzo tried to slip him a few of the coins he had brought along that night, planning to make a generous donation to Don Abbondio if the priest, despite himself, had served his purpose. As promised, a cart was waiting for them. The driver greeted his three passengers and helped them climb aboard. With a "Giddyap" to the horse and a crack of the whip, they were off.

The author of the manuscript does not describe that nighttime journey, nor does he disclose the name of the town where Fra Cristoforo had directed the two women. Indeed, he refuses to do so quite explicitly. Later in our story, the reasons for his reticence will become clear. Lucia's adventures during her stay there became entangled with the shadowy intrigues of a member of a family that was very powerful during the period when the author was writing. To explain that person's, or rather, her strange behavior in this particular case, he also had to give a brief account of her previous life. Her family enjoyed a stature that the patient reader will come to understand. But my diligent research discovered through other sources things that the author's circumspection had sought to hide. A Milanese historian who mentions the same person does not give

either her name or the name of the town, it's true.* As for the place, however, he does say that it was a noble and ancient town which was a city in all but name. At one point he writes that the Lambro River passes through it. At another, that it had an archpriest. By piecing together these bits of information we can deduce, without a doubt, that it was Monza. In the vast treasury of educated guesses, there may well be more subtle possibilities, but none, I believe, that are more certain. We could also, on the basis of sound conjecture, say the name of the family with which Lucia became entangled. But although it has been extinct for some time, I thought it best to keep their name inside my pen, to avoid wronging the departed and to leave something for the educated to investigate.

Our travelers arrived in Monza, then, shortly after sunrise. The driver entered a tavern. A regular customer of the place and an acquaintance of the host, he ordered a room where they could eat and then escorted the trio inside. Thanking the man, Renzo tried to get him to accept some money, too. Like the boatman, however, the driver aspired to a more distant but greater reward. He, too, pulled his hand away and, as if to escape temptation, hurried off to feed his horse.

After an evening like the one I have just described, and a night that each of you can imagine for yourself, spent in the company of such worries, with the constant fear, at every stirring of the late autumn breeze, of some unpleasant encounter; amid the constant lurching of the uncomfortable vehicle, which rudely awoke anyone who had begun to nod off; the three of them could hardly believe they were now sitting on a stable bench, and in any type of room at all. Their breakfast was of the sort afforded by the food shortages of the day, their meager resources before an uncertain future, and little appetite. All three thought back to the banquet to which, two days before, they had been expecting to sit down, and each heaved

* Josephi Ripamonti, *Historiae patriae,* decadis V, book VI, chapt. III, 358 et seq. Mediolani: Ex regio palatio, apud Io. Baptistam, et Iulium Caesarem Malatestam . . . , [1648?]

a sigh. Renzo would have liked to remain in Monza for at least a day, to make sure the women were situated, and their basic needs taken care of. But the padre had instructed Agnese and Lucia to send him on his way immediately, so they reminded Renzo of those instructions along with many other reasons: that people would talk, that prolonging their separation would be more painful, that he would soon be able to come by to give and receive any news. Finally, he decided to leave. They agreed, as best they could, on how they would meet again, hopefully as soon as possible. This time Lucia did not hide her tears. Renzo struggled to hold back his own. Squeezing Agnese's hand tightly, he said, in a choked voice, "Until we meet again," and left.

The women would have been at quite a loss were it not for the good driver, who had been instructed to take them after breakfast to the Capuchin monastery and provide them with all the assistance they required. So they set out with him for the monastery, which, as everyone knows, is not far from Monza. Once they had reached the gate, he rang the bell and asked for the Father Guardian, who came at once and opened their letter on the spot.

"Oh, Fra Cristoforo!" he exclaimed, recognizing the handwriting. The tone of his voice and the expression on his face clearly indicated that he was saying the name of a close friend. In the letter, I should add, our good Cristoforo had recommended the women with such warmth, and described their situation with such emotion, that the Father Guardian made occasional gestures of surprise or indignation. Looking up from the piece of paper, he gazed at the women with compassion and interest. When he had finished reading, he remained in thought for a few moments and then said, "The best person for this is the Signora . . . if she wishes to assume the responsibility . . ."

Drawing Agnese aside, to the piazza in front of the monastery, he asked her a few questions, which she answered to his satisfaction. Returning to where Lucia was standing, he said to both women, "My dear ladies, I'll do my best. And I hope to find you a refuge that

is quite safe, quite honorable, until God has provided for you in a better manner. Would you come with me, please?"

The women nodded respectfully, and the friar continued. "Good. I will accompany you straight to the convent of the Signora. Walk a few steps behind me, please, since people like to gossip, and God only knows how they'll wag their tongues if they see the Father Guardian on the street with a pretty girl . . . with two women, I meant to say."

With these words he set out. Lucia blushed. The driver smiled, giving a knowing glance at Agnese, who could not resist doing the same. They let the friar go on ahead, following about ten steps behind him. This allowed the women to ask the driver the question they had not dared to raise with the Father Guardian. Who was this Signora?

"The Signora," he replied, "is a nun, but a nun unlike the others. Not to suggest that she's an abbess or a prioress. In fact, from what I hear, she's one of the youngest members of the convent. But her family goes way back, and the blood in their veins runs blue. They came from a powerful house in Spain. That's why they call her the Signora, to show that she's a noble. The whole town calls her that, since they say there's never been anyone quite like her in the convent. And her family down in Milan has a lot of influence, and they always get their way. So you can imagine what it's like here in Monza; her father, even though he's never around, is still the leading citizen. That's why she has the run of the convent. Even outsiders have a lot of respect for her. And when she promises to do something, she does it. So if that good friar manages to place you in her care, and she accepts you, you'll be as safe as you would be on the altar, I can tell you that much."

As he approached the town gate, which in those days was surrounded by the rubble of a collapsed tower and the ruins of an old castle (which a dozen of my readers might remember seeing when it was still standing), the Father Guardian stopped and turned around to see if the others were still following. Then he passed

through the gates and headed toward the convent. He stopped again, on the convent's threshold, to wait for his little brigade. He asked the driver to come back in a couple of hours for a message. The man promised he would and took his leave of the women, who showered him with thanks and messages for Padre Cristoforo. The friar accompanied mother and daughter into the outermost courtyard of the convent, then left them in the quarters of the stewardess, the laywoman who oversaw the convent, and went by himself to request the favor.

After keeping them waiting for a while, he reappeared joyously, to tell them to come with him. And not a minute too soon, since Agnese and Lucia were struggling to extricate themselves from the prying questions of the stewardess. Crossing a second courtyard, the Father Guardian advised the women on how to behave with the Signora. "She is well inclined toward you," he said, "and is capable of doing you all the good in the world. Be humble and respectful, answer honestly any questions it may please her to ask, and when there are no more questions, leave everything to me." They entered a ground-floor room that led to the nun's parlor. Before setting foot inside, the guardian, pointing to the door, whispered to the women, "She's here," as if to remind them of his advice.

Entering the parlor, Lucia, who had never been to a convent before, looked around for the Signora, so that she might curtsey to her. Seeing no one, she stood there, not knowing what to do. When the priest and Agnese walked toward a corner, she looked in their direction and noticed an oddly shaped window, covered by two thick, tightly wrought iron gratings, only a palm's width apart from each other. Behind them stood a nun.

From her face, she looked to be about twenty-five. Her appearance created an initial impression of beauty, but a dejected, faded, and, I would almost say, disheveled beauty. A black veil was stretched flat across her head, and draped down evenly on either side of her face. Right below it was a bright white linen band, lowered partway down a forehead of a different but no less brilliant whiteness. A second pleated band circled her face, coming to a close under her chin in a

wimple that spread over her chest, covering the neckline of a black habit. Her forehead would often wrinkle, as if from a painful spasm, in a rapid motion of her black eyebrows. Two eyes, also as black as coal, sometimes stared directly at people with a haughty inquisitiveness; other times they were quickly lowered, as if to seek a hiding place.

There were moments when a careful observer might deduce that those eyes were pleading for affection, for sympathy, for pity. There were others when he might think he had caught a sudden glimpse of a deep and long-repressed hatred, something vaguely menacing and cruel. When she stared into space, some people imagined a proud apathy, while others suspected the anguish of a hidden thought, a familiar preoccupation that overpowered any interest in her surroundings. Her pale cheeks sloped downward in a delicate, graceful curve that had been altered and hollowed through a slow exhaustion. Her lips, although colored by only the barest hint of faded rose, stood out from her general pallor, and their movements, like those of her eyes, were quick, lively, and filled with passion and mystery.

The shapely grandeur of her person disappeared, however, into a certain laxness in her bearing, or rather it appeared to be disfigured by movements that were sudden, erratic, and too resolute for a woman, much less a nun. Even the way she wore her habit suggested a deliberate or unconscious announcement of just how unique a nun she was. Her cincture was tied around her waist with a certain worldly care, and from her headband, a single lock of black hair emerged, betraying a neglect or scorn for the rules prescribing that a nun's hair be kept short from the moment it was cut during the solemn investiture ceremony.

Agnese and Lucia did not notice, since they were unpracticed in distinguishing between one nun and another. The Father Guardian, who was not seeing the Signora for the first time, was already accustomed, as were many others, to the aura of strangeness that emanated from her person and her manner.

At that moment she was, as I was saying, standing near the grate

with one hand resting on it languidly, and her pale white fingers entwined in the empty spaces. She stared at Lucia, who was coming forward hesitantly. "Reverend Mother and illustrious Signora," said the Father Guardian, his head bowed and one hand on his chest, "this is the poor girl to whom I hope you may extend your true protection. And this is her mother."

Thus introduced, mother and daughter curtsied deeply. The Signora gestured with her hand that this was sufficient and said, turning to the priest, "I am happy to oblige our good friends the Capuchin friars. But," she continued, "to better understand what I can do for her, could you please explain to me in greater detail the case of this young girl."

Lucia turned red and bowed her head.

"What you should know, Reverend Mother," Agnese began to say. But the Father Guardian gave her a look that stopped her short and replied, in turn, "This girl, illustrious Signora, was recommended to me, as I mentioned, by a fellow friar. To escape grave danger she had to leave her hometown secretly. She needs sanctuary, for a time, a place where she can live anonymously, and where no one would dare bother her, even if . . ."

"What dangers?" the Signora interrupted. "Please, Father Guardian, do not speak to me in riddles. You must know that we nuns prefer to hear every detail of a story."

"Dangers," he replied, "that to the Reverend Mother's pure ears would best be left unsaid."

"Oh, of course," the Signora said quickly, appearing to blush. But did she really? Anyone who observed the quick expression of indignation that appeared on her face might have wondered, especially compared to the more innocent color that occasionally spread over Lucia's cheeks.

"I will only say," the Father Guardian continued, "that a tyrannical lord—for, unlike your illustrious Ladyship, not all the world's powerful use God's gifts for His greater glory, and to help their neighbor—a tyrannical nobleman tormented this child with inde-

cent flattery. When that failed, he had the gall to pursue her openly, and forcefully, giving the poor girl no choice but to flee her home."

"Come closer, my child," said the Signora to Lucia, beckoning to her with one finger. "I know that the Father Guardian is the voice of truth. But no one is better informed of this affair than you. You are the one who should tell us whether this nobleman did indeed pursue you improperly."

As for coming closer, Lucia was quick to obey. Answering the nun was another matter. Any question about that particular subject, even if it had been asked by one of her peers, would have left her more than a little flustered: Coming from that lady, with a hint of malicious skepticism, crushed what little courage she had.

"Signora . . . Mother . . . Reverend . . ." she stammered, giving no sign of being able to say more.

At this point Agnese, as the person who, after Lucia, was certainly the best informed, felt authorized to come to her rescue. "Your Ladyship," she said, "I can testify that my daughter hated that lord like the demon hates holy water. He was the devil in the flesh. Forgive me for my poor speech. We're simple people. The fact is that my poor girl was betrothed to a good God-fearing boy of our same class. And if our priest had been more of a man, at least what I call a man . . . I know I'm talking about a religious man, but Padre Cristoforo, a friend of the Father Guardian here, is just as religious as he is, and he's a most charitable man, and if he was here, he could attest—"

"You're quick to speak without being spoken to," the Signora broke in with a haughty, angry exclamation that made her look almost ugly. "Silence! I know a thing or two about parents always answering on their children's behalf!"

Mortified, Agnese gave Lucia a look as if to say, "The trouble you get me into, with your always being so tongue-tied." The guardian also gestured to the girl, winking at her and nodding to indicate that the time had come to step out of her shell and rescue her poor mother.

"Reverend Lady," Lucia began, "what my mother was saying is the God's honest truth. The boy who was courting me"—at this she turned bright red—"I accepted of my own free will. Please excuse me if I speak too boldly, but it is only so that you won't think badly of my mother. As for that nobleman (God forgive him!), I would rather die than fall into his hands. Could your Ladyship be so merciful as to protect us, since we are reduced to begging for shelter and disturbing good people? May God's will be done. You can be certain, your Ladyship, that no one will offer more heartfelt prayers on your behalf than we poor women."

"You, I can believe," said the Signora, softening her tone. "But I would rather speak with you alone. Unless there is a need for further clarification, or further reasons, to attend to the concerns of the Father Guardian," she added immediately, addressing him with a studied courtesy. "Indeed," she continued, "I've already found an idea. Here's what I think would be the best thing to do for the moment. The stewardess of the convent married off her youngest daughter a few days ago. These two women could take the room that is now free, and take over some of her old chores. To tell you the truth"—and here she hinted to the friar that he should come closer to the grating—"since the harvest was so poor, we were thinking of not replacing the girl. But I will speak with the Mother Abbess. One word from me . . . and as a favor to the Father Guardian . . . I think we can consider it as good as done."

The guardian began to thank her, but the Signora interrupted him. "No need to make such a fuss. If I were in need, I know that I, too, could always count on the help of the Capuchin friars. In the end," she continued, with a smile that disclosed a hint of bitter irony, "are we all not brothers and sisters?"

At this, she summoned a lay sister (in a singular distinction, two of them had been assigned to her personal service) and ordered them to notify the abbess and make the necessary arrangements with the stewardess and Agnese. She then dismissed the sister, took leave of the Father Guardian, and detained Lucia for a private conversation. The friar accompanied Agnese to the door, giving her

additional instructions, and went off to write a detailed report to his friend Cristoforo.

"What an odd bird this Signora is," he thought as he went on his way, "very odd indeed! If you manage to get on her good side, you can get her to do what you want. I'm sure Cristoforo hardly expected that I would be able to serve him so quickly and so well. Such a good man! Always taking on new obligations: There's no stopping him! But he does it for the best. This time it went well for him, since he found a friend who, without too much fuss or ceremony, found a solution to the problem in the wink of an eye. He'll be happy, and realize that his brothers down here are also quite capable."

The Signora, who in the presence of the seasoned Capuchin had measured her actions and her words, no longer worried once she was alone with the naïve peasant girl. The things she said became stranger and stranger. Rather than report them, we think it best to briefly relate the background of this unhappy woman. Just enough to explain that odd and mysterious behavior we have just witnessed, and to understand the reasons for things that later came to pass.

She was the youngest daughter of Prince ***, a leading Milanese nobleman, who could be considered one of the wealthiest men in the city. But the high opinion he held of his title made him feel as if his possessions were barely sufficient to keep up appearances, and that they were, indeed, quite meager. His thoughts were dedicated solely to conserving his estate undiminished, undivided in perpetuity, to the best of his abilities. The manuscript does not tell us exactly how many children he had. It only hints that he had sent to the cloister all of the younger children, boys and girls, so that his property would remain intact for his firstborn son, who was destined to preserve the family: In other words, he begot children, and then tormented himself by tormenting them. The unhappy child who is our concern was still hiding in its mother's womb when its fate was irrevocably sealed. The only thing left to decide was whether that fate was to be a monk or a nun: a decision that required not the child's consent but its presence.

When she was born, her father, the Prince, wanting to give her a name that would immediately suggest the idea of the cloister, and a name that had been borne by a saint of high birth, called her Gertrude. The first toys placed in her hands were dolls dressed up as nuns. Then came holy cards with pictures of nuns. These gifts were always accompanied with a lot of fuss about how they must be well cared for, how precious they were, and the rhetorical question, "Isn't she the pretty little doll?"

When the Prince, the Princess, or the heir apparent—who alone of the males was being raised at home—wished to compliment the little girl on her lovely appearance, they could seemingly find no better way to express themselves than to say, "You look just like a mother abbess!" No one ever told her outright, "You have to become a nun." Instead the idea was taken for granted and brought up only incidentally, every time they spoke of her future. Whenever little Gertrude would act somewhat arrogantly and imperiously—as she tended to do—they would say, "You are a little girl. It's not right for you to behave in this way. Once you have become mother abbess, then you can do as you wish, and boss everyone around." At other times the Prince, reprimanding her for the overly lax and casual manners to which she was inclined, would say, "Now, now! This is no way for someone in your position to act. If you wish to receive the respect that is your due one day, you will have to start learning how to control yourself. Remember that in all things you must be the first in the convent, because your family name is something you take with you wherever you go."

Words like these impressed upon the young girl's mind that she was to become a nun. And the words that issued from her father's mouth had a greater impact than all of the others put together. While the Prince's customary demeanor was that of an austere master, when it came to the future of his children his facial expression and his every word emanated an unshakeable resolve and a sullen guardianship of his authority that lent his opinions a sense of fatal necessity.

At the age of six, Gertrude was transferred to the convent where

we first met her, for the sake of her education but especially to set her on the road to the vocation imposed upon her. The choice of place had not been made casually. Lucia and Agnese's kindly guide had mentioned that the Signora's father was the most powerful man in Monza. If we combine this testimony, for what it's worth, with other clues that the anonymous author allows to slip through occasional lapses in his vigilance, we could also assume that he was the feudal lord of the town. Whatever the case may be, he enjoyed immense authority. And he thought that in Monza, more than anywhere else, his daughter would be treated with the deference and decorum that might entice her to choose that convent as her permanent residence. Nor was he wrong. The abbess and some of the other meddling nuns who were ready to stir the pot, so to speak, were overjoyed to be offered the pledge of his protection, which would be useful in times of particular need as well as glorious in general throughout the year.

They accepted the proposal with expressions of gratitude that, despite their fervency, were hardly exaggerated. And they complied fully with the intentions that the Prince had intimated regarding the permanent situation of his daughter: intentions that concurred perfectly with their own. The moment Gertrude entered the convent, she was given the sobriquet of "la Signorina," and a place of distinction at the table and in the dormitory. Her conduct was held up as an example to the other students. Endless sweets and caresses, seasoned with the slightly deferential familiarity that so enchants children when they find it in people who normally treat children with an air of superiority. Not that all the nuns were conspiring to draw the poor girl into the trap. There were many simple sisters who would have been appalled by the idea of sacrificing a daughter to such venal ends. But busy as they were with their particular chores, some were unaware of the scheme, some saw nothing wrong with it, some abstained from looking into it, and some kept quiet to avoid creating a useless scandal. There were, however, one or two, who remembered how, through similar arts, they had been led to a decision they would later regret. And

they felt compassion for the poor innocent child, which they expressed through tender, melancholy caresses. Gertrude didn't have the least suspicion of some underlying mystery, so the plot moved forward, and it might have until the end, if she had been the only girl in the convent. Among her fellow pupils, however, there were some who knew that they were destined to be married.

Little Gertrude, raised on notions of her own superiority, spoke grandly about her future destiny as an abbess and as the princess of the convent, and wanted at all costs to be an object of envy for the others. But she was surprised and irked to see that some of them felt no envy at all. In contrast to her own majestic—though narrow and cold—images of leading the convent, they boasted a dazzling array of images of weddings and banquets, receptions and balls, vacations in the country, clothing and carriages. These sent Gertrude's mind buzzing like a beehive placed before a basket of freshly picked flowers. Her parents and teachers had cultivated her innate vanity in order to make her like the cloister. But when this passion was aroused by ideas more congenial to her nature, she chased after them with a lively and spontaneous ardor.

So as not to be outdone by her classmates, and at the same time to gratify her new inclination, she would say that, after all, no one could place a veil over her head without her consent, and that she, too—better than any of them—could get married, live in a palace, and enjoy the world. That she could, if she had wanted to, if she would like to, if she did indeed want to. Which was, in fact, what she wanted. The need for her consent, an idea that until then had nestled, unobserved, in a corner of her mind, started to grow and to take on its full measure. She constantly appealed for its help, so as to enjoy her visions of a more amenable future. This idea, however, never failed to be chased by another: that she would have to refuse to give that consent before her father, the Prince, who considered it a fait accompli, or acted as if he did. At the thought, the daughter's spirit fell short of the confidence that her words professed. She would then compare herself to her classmates, whose high confidence stood in sore contrast to her own wavering resolve, and feel

the painful envy toward them that she had initially thought she herself would inspire. And her envy made her hate them. Sometimes that hatred took the form of slights, rudeness, and insulting remarks. Sometimes their shared hopes and desires briefly placated her hatred, making her feel the semblance of a momentary intimacy. Sometimes, while wanting to enjoy something real and present, she contented herself with the preferential treatment she was accorded, and made the other girls feel her superiority. Sometimes, unable to bear any longer her fears and desires in solitude, she went to them meekly, as if to beg for their kindness, advice, and courage.

While waging these deplorable little wars with herself and with others, she crossed the threshold of puberty and entered that critical age when a sort of mysterious power seems to inhabit the spirit and enhances, adorns, and strengthens every inclination, every idea, sometimes transforming or steering them down an unexpected path. Until that point, Gertrude's dreams of the future had settled on external splendor and pomp. But now something tender and affectionate, which had at first spread softly, like a fog, started to unfurl and to dominate her fantasies. In the deepest recesses of her mind, she had built a splendid retreat where she could take refuge from the present, and welcome characters who had been pieced together from odd bits and vague memories of childhood, the little she had been able to see of the outside world, and the things she had learned from the gossip of her classmates. She spent time with these characters, conversed with them, and replied on their behalf. It was a place where she gave orders and received every type of flattery. Now and again, thoughts of religion would intrude to disturb these brilliant and hard-won festivities. But religion, as the poor girl had been taught and understood it to mean, did not prohibit pride. On the contrary, it sanctified it, and proposed it as a means to attain earthly happiness. Emptied of its substance, religion thus became just another one of her fantasies. But in those moments when religion ruled Gertrude's imagination, the unhappy child, overwhelmed by vague fears, and seized by a vague sense of duty, imagined that her revulsion for the cloister, and her

resistance to her elders' hints as to her choice of station, were a sin. And she promised in her heart to atone for it by closing herself voluntarily in the cloister.

According to the law, a girl could not be admitted into the order until she had been examined by a priest, known as the vicar of the nuns, or by his deputy, to ensure that she was doing so of her own free will. This examination could not be conducted until one year after she had expressed her wishes to the vicar in a written supplication. The nuns who had accepted the sad assignment of assuring that Gertrude would make the eternal vow with the least possible awareness of what she was doing seized on one of the moments we have described to get her to transcribe and sign just such a document. To persuade her, they repeated to her over and over again that it was a mere formality that could not take effect (which is true) except through other, later acts that would express her will.

No sooner had the supplication reached its destination than Gertrude regretted having signed it. Then she regretted her regret, spending days and months in an endless wavering between conflicting feelings. For a long time, she kept the fact that she had taken this step hidden from her companions, partly out of fear of exposing a firm decision to dissent, partly out of shame that she might be admitting a mistake. In the end she was overcome by the desire to pour out her soul, and to seek counsel and encouragement.

According to another law, a girl cannot be admitted to the examination of her vocation until she has spent at least one month away from the convent where she received her education. One year had already gone by since her supplication had been sent, and Gertrude was notified that she would soon be taken away from the convent and accompanied to her father's house, where she was to remain for one month and take all the steps necessary to complete the application she had begun. The Prince and the rest of the family treated all of this as a given, as if she had already taken her vows, but the girl had something different in mind. Rather than proceed through the next steps, she was contemplating how to retract the first. In her distress, she decided to confide in one of her compan-

ions, a girl who was always candid and ready to give firm advice. She suggested that Gertrude inform her father of her change of heart in a letter, since she did not have the courage to deliver to his face a plain, "This is not what I want." And since there is no such thing as free advice in this world, her advisor made Gertrude pay by mocking her ineptitude. The letter was written in secret, compiled by four or five of her confidantes, and delivered through carefully contrived routes. Gertrude was filled with anxiety, awaiting a reply that never arrived. Instead, a few days later, the abbess summoned her to her cell and, with an attitude of mystery, disgust, and compassion, made dark allusions to the Prince's great wrath, or to a mistake the girl had committed, while hinting, nevertheless, that if she behaved properly there was reason to hope that all would be forgotten. Gertrude understood, and did not dare to ask any further questions.

The much dreaded and desired day finally arrived. Although Gertrude knew she was heading into battle, the very fact of leaving the convent, leaving behind the walls that had imprisoned her for eight years, riding in a carriage through the open countryside, seeing once again the city, and her home, filled her with a sense of tumultuous joy. As for the battle awaiting her, the poor girl, following the instructions of her confidantes, had already readied herself and, as we say nowadays, made her plan. "If they try to force me," she thought, "I will be firm. I will be humble and respectful, but I will not consent. All I have to do is refuse to say 'yes' again, and I shall refuse. If they try to win me over through kindness, then I shall be even kinder. I will weep. I will pray. I will move them to pity. In the end I expect nothing other than not to be sacrificed."

As often happens with such expectations, however, neither one nor the other came to pass. Days went by without a word from either her father or the other family members concerning her supplication or its retraction, without anything at all being proposed to her, without receiving either tenderness or threats. Her parents were serious, unkind, and curt with her, never explaining why. One could see that they regarded her as disobedient, unworthy. A mys-

terious anathema seemed to have fallen upon her, separating her from the other members of the family and allowing her to join them only long enough to make her feel uneasy. Occasionally, and only at established hours, she was admitted to the company of her parents and her eldest brother. The intimacy they seemed to share made the desolation to which Gertrude had been abandoned even more tangible and painful. No one spoke to her. Every time she would timidly venture a few words on anything other than a necessary matter, she was either ignored or rewarded with a distracted, contemptuous, or severe glance.

Whenever she could no longer bear this bitter and humiliating discrimination, and insisted and tried to be close to her family, whenever she begged for a little love, she immediately sensed that she was touching, indirectly but clearly, the raw nerve of her vocation. It was subtly hinted to her that there was only one way to regain her family's affection. At such moments Gertrude, who would not have wanted their love under such conditions, was compelled to withdraw, to reject the first signs of the kindness she had so desired, and to return, of her own free will, to her place of excommunication, leaving in her wake a lingering appearance of guilt.

Her current situation contrasted painfully with the joyous daydreams that used to occupy Gertrude's time, and still did in the secrecy of her mind. She had hoped that, in the splendid and sociable home of her father, she would be able to enjoy at least some real taste of the things she had imagined. Instead she was as strictly and completely cloistered as she had been at the convent. The idea of taking a stroll outside was out of the question. The only need she had for going out was eliminated by a private chapel that connected the house to the church next door. Companionship was more dreary, more begrudging, and less varied than in the convent. Every time a visit was announced, Gertrude was obliged to go upstairs to the top floor and lock herself in her chambers, alone but for a handful of elderly domestics. This is also where she dined when there were guests. The servants complied, in manner and speech, with the example and intentions of their masters. And Gertrude,

who would have been more inclined to treat them with an aristocratic familiarity, found herself having to be grateful for any shred of affection that they showed her, as if she were one of them. She stooped to begging for it and was humiliated, and increasingly pained, when she was repaid with blatant disregard, accompanied, however, by a slightly obsequious formality.

Gertrude could not help but notice, however, that one young page, unlike all the rest, treated her with respect, and felt a compassion of a particular kind for her. More than anyone she had met before, his demeanor resembled that of her ideal creations, within the order of things she had so fervently contemplated in her imagination. Gradually something imperceptible and new came over the girl's manner: an unusual tranquility and disquiet, as if she had found something she cared about, that she wanted to stare at all day without being noticed. She was watched even more closely to see what was happening and what was not. One morning she was surprised by one of the maids while secretly folding a sheet of paper on which she would have done better to write nothing. After a brief struggle, the paper remained in the hands of the maid, and from her it passed into the hands of the Prince.

Gertrude's terror at the sound of his footsteps can be neither described nor imagined, with a father like that, so irate, together with the burden of her own guilt. When she saw him appear, with that angry scowl, and that piece of paper in his hand, she longed to be a hundred feet below the ground, never mind in a cloister. His words were short but cruel. The punishment that he immediately threatened was to lock her in her room, under the watch of the woman who had made the discovery. But this was only the beginning, a temporary solution. There was a threat, a feeling in the air, of a punishment that was more dire, more uncertain, and therefore all the more dreadful.

The page was immediately fired, of course. A terrible fate was threatened against him should he ever breathe a word of what had happened. In issuing these warnings, the Prince slapped him twice, firmly, to associate the episode with a memory that would rid the

lad of any temptation to brag. It was not hard to find some sort of excuse for dismissing a page. As for his daughter, word was circulated that she was indisposed.

So Gertrude was abandoned to anxiety, shame, remorse, fear of the future, and the sole company of a woman she despised, the witness to her indiscretion and the reason for her disgrace. The woman in turn despised Gertrude, thanks to whom she herself had been reduced to the dull life of a jailer, without knowing for how long, and as the eternal guardian of a dangerous secret.

The first confused turmoil of emotions slowly subsided, only to return to her mind, one at a time, where they were magnified and remained to torment her thoughts more sharply and indiscriminately. Whatever could that mysteriously threatened punishment be? A multitude of the strangest and most varied punishments assailed Gertrude's heated and naïve imagination. The most likely seemed to be a return to the convent in Monza, where she would reappear no longer as the Signorina, but as a sinner, to be locked up until who knows when! And who knows how she would be treated!

What most pained an imagination like hers, already so full of pain, was the fear of shame. Every sentence, every word, every comma, of that cursed letter passed through her mind again and again. She imagined them being observed, pondered by an unexpected reader, so different from the person to whom they were destined. She pictured them passing before the eyes of her mother, her brother, or goodness knows who. All else paled by comparison.

Nor did the image of the boy who had been the source of the scandal fail to drop by frequently to torment the poor prisoner. Imagine the strange impression his phantom must have made in the company of the other ghostly visitors, who were so grave, so cold, so menacing, so unlike him. But precisely because she could not separate him from them, nor go back momentarily to those fleeting pleasures without the immediate appearance of the suffering that had resulted, she gradually began to revisit them rarely, to repress her memories, to wean herself from them. Nor did she dwell more

at length or more willingly on the bright happy fantasies of the earlier days. They were too distant from her current circumstances, and from any likelihood of a future.

The only castle that was not in the air, the only place where Gertrude could imagine a peaceful, honorable refuge, was the convent, which she had decided to enter, for eternity. Such a decision (she was certain) would take care of everything, settle every debt, and change her situation in an instant. The thoughts of what the rest of her life would be, it's true, rebelled against this proposal. But times had changed. From the abyss into which she had fallen, and compared to the fears that sometimes gripped her, to become a nun who was feted, respected, and obeyed sounded comfortable. Her former aversion was attenuated by two very different and alternating sentiments: a fantastical, tender, devoted remorse over her offense; and pride, sharpened and aggravated by the manners of her jailer, who (often, it's true, after being provoked by Gertrude) took revenge by instilling fear of that threatened punishment, or scolding her for her lapse. Later, to show her good side, the maid would adopt a protective tone that was even more odious than an insult. On these various occasions, Gertrude's desire to escape from her jailer's clutches and appear to her in a state superior to her current rage and pity became so vivid and sharp as to make anything that would fulfill it seem acceptable.

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One morning, after four or five long days of confinement, Gertrude, who had been provoked and enraged to an extreme by the teasing of her guard, threw herself into a corner of the room and sat there for a long time with her face hidden between her hands, seething. At the same moment she was overcome by the need to see other faces, to hear other words, to be treated differently. She thought of her father, her family. The thought retreated in terror. But she realized that it was up to her to befriend them, and she felt a sudden joy. It was followed by a confusion, a sudden repentance for her sin, and an equal desire for atonement. She had already dwelt on this idea,

but never before had she entered into it so ardently. She stood up from the corner, went to a desk, picked up the fatal pen once again, and wrote her father a letter filled with enthusiasm and contrition, affliction and hope, begging for his forgiveness, and showing herself ready to do all that she could, without conditions, to please he whom she had to please.

Chapter 10

There are moments when the spirit, particularly of youth, is so vulnerable that the slightest nudge will make it accept anything with the appearance of virtue and sacrifice; like a flower that has just bloomed, it collapses gently onto its fragile stem, ready to surrender its fragrances to the first breath of air. Such moments, which others should admire with timid respect, are seized upon by self-interest to fetter an unguarded will.

Upon reading his daughter's letter, Prince *** immediately spied an opening for his long and unwavering ambition. He summoned Gertrude, and prepared to strike the iron while it was hot. She appeared and, without raising her eyes to look her father in the face, threw herself on her knees before him, with barely enough breath to say, "Forgive me!" He gestured for her to stand up, but in a voice unsuited for encouragement, he responded that it was not enough to want or ask for forgiveness. That would be too easy, too natural, for someone who had done wrong and feared punishment. Forgiveness, in short, had to be earned. Trembling and chastened, Gertrude asked what she had to do. The Prince (at a moment like this I don't have the heart to call him her father) did not answer directly, but instead started to speak at length about her error. His words stung the poor girl's spirit, like a calloused hand rubbing a wound. He went on to say that, even if . . . perhaps . . . he had earlier harbored some intention of finding a situation for her outside the convent, she had created an insurmountable obstacle, since a man of honor, like himself, would not stoop to offering another gentleman the hand of a signorina who had given such proof of her character.

The poor girl was mortified. Then the Prince, gradually softening the tone of his voice and his words, went on to say that, nevertheless, for every error there was redress and mercy; that hers was of the kind for which redress was most clearly prescribed; that she should see this sinful lapse as a warning that the secular life was too full of danger for her . . .

"Oh, yes!" exclaimed Gertrude, shaken by fear, prepared by shame, and moved in that moment by a sudden fit of tenderness.

"Ah! So you do understand!" the Prince continued relentlessly. "Well, then, let us speak no more of the past. All is forgotten. You have chosen the only honorable, suitable path still open to you. But since you have done so of your own free will, and in the proper manner, it is my duty to make sure that you are gratified everywhere and in everything. It is my duty to restore your every privilege and merit. I shall see to it." At this, he shook the bell on the side table, and to the servant who came in he said, "The Princess and the young prince. At once!" He then told Gertrude, "I want to share my consolation with them immediately. I want everyone to start treating you properly at once. You have experienced a part of what the severe father can be. From now on you shall feel the whole loving father."

At these words, Gertrude was dumbstruck. She wondered how that "yes" which had slipped out could portend so much. She tried to think of a way to retract it or restrict its significance. But the Prince's conviction seemed so complete, his joy so jealous, his benevolence so conditional, that Gertrude did not dare utter a word that might disturb him in the least.

A few moments later, the summoned parties arrived. They were skeptical and surprised to see Gertrude, and they stared her up and down. But the Prince, with a joyful, loving demeanor that commanded them to act likewise, said, "Behold the lost lamb. May this be the last reminder of a painful memory. She is the consolation of our family. Gertrude no longer requires advice. Now she desires of her own accord what we had wanted for her own good. She has made up her mind, and told me"—here she raised her eyes toward

her father with a look both terrified and imploring, as if to beg him to stop, but he continued undeterred—"that she has decided to take the veil."

"Brava! Wonderful news!" exclaimed mother and son in unison, each giving her a hug. She received their welcome with tears, which they interpreted as tears of consolation. The Prince then expounded on the things he would do to make his daughter's future splendid and joyful. He spoke of the privileges she would enjoy in the convent and the town. That she would be treated like a princess, the representative of her family. That as soon as she came of age, she would be elevated to the highest rank. And in the meantime, she would be a subordinate in name alone. The Princess and the young prince continued to shower her with congratulations and praise. Gertrude felt as if she were in thrall to a dream.

"We should set the date to go to Monza to make the request to the abbess," the Prince said. "She'll be so happy! I can tell you, the whole convent will appreciate the honor Gertrude bestows upon them. In fact . . . why don't we go today? Gertrude will be glad to get a little fresh air."

"Yes, why don't we?" said the Princess.

"I'll go to give the orders," said the young prince.

"But . . ." Gertrude started to say, submissively.

"Wait a minute, now," the Prince continued, "we should let her decide. Perhaps she does not feel ready today, and would rather wait until tomorrow. Tell me: Would you like us to go today or tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow," was the faint reply of Gertrude, who still thought she could accomplish something by taking her time.

"Tomorrow," said the Prince solemnly. "She has decided that we shall go tomorrow. In the meantime, I will go to the vicar of the nuns to set a date for the examination." No sooner said than done. The Prince left and went to the vicar himself (no small concession), and they agreed that she would appear in two days.

For the rest of the day, Gertrude did not know a moment's peace. She would have preferred to rest from all the commotion, to clear

her head, so to speak, to take stock of what she had done and still had to do, to know her mind, and to delay, for a moment, the machine that, only just set into motion, was already moving so precipitously. But there was no stopping it. Her obligations came fast and furious, one on top of the other. Immediately after the Prince's departure, she was led to the dressing room of the Princess, where her mother had her own maid comb Gertrude's hair and had her dress. The finishing touches had not even been applied when the announcement came that dinner was served. Gertrude passed between servants bowing to express their congratulations on her recovery. At the table, she found some of her closest relatives, who had been quickly assembled to pay homage to her and to celebrate two happy occasions: her restored health and the announcement of her vocation.

The little bride (as young novices were called, and as everyone greeted Gertrude when she appeared) had her hands full responding to the compliments raining down on her from every side. She could clearly hear that her every answer was a form of acceptance and confirmation. But how else could she respond? From the table, the party moved immediately to the hour of the *trottata.** Gertrude got into the carriage with her mother and two uncles who had been at dinner. Following the usual route, they came out on Strada Marina, which in those days crossed the space occupied today by the public gardens, and used to be where the nobility arrived in their carriages for restoration from the fatigues of their day. The uncles spoke with Gertrude, as required by the occasion. One of them, more than the other, who seemed to know every person, every carriage, every livery, and in every moment had something to say about this gentleman or that lady, suddenly turned to her and said, "Aren't you the smart one, turning your back on all this rubbish! Very clever! You're leaving us poor society folk in this mess, withdrawing

* In Milan the late-afternoon *trottata*—a procession of carriages being pulled at a trot—went from the Sforza Castle in the center of town to the public gardens of Porta Orientale.

from the world to lead a holy life, and going to heaven in a horse-drawn carriage!"

Later that afternoon they returned home. The servants, hurrying down the stairs with torches, informed them that quite a few visitors were waiting. The word had spread and the relatives and friends were coming to pay their respects. They entered the reception room. The little bride was the idol, the plaything, the victim. Everyone wanted her for him- or herself: This one made her promise to send him sweets, that one promised to visit, one mentioned her relative, *Madre* something or other, one her acquaintance, Madre someone else, this one raved about the Monza sky, that one chatted, with great delight, of the fine figure she would cut in the convent. Others, who hadn't managed to penetrate the throng besieging her, looked for an opportunity to come forward, and felt a bit guilty until they had paid their respects. Little by little, the crowd thinned out. Everyone departed free of guilt, and Gertrude was left alone with her parents and her brother.

"Finally," said the Prince, "I have had the consolation of seeing my daughter treated in the manner to which she was born. I have to admit, however, that some of the credit is hers, for she showed that she will have no problem leading the convent and upholding the family reputation."

They dined quickly in order to retire immediately and be ready to depart early the next morning.

Bitter, vexed, and at the same time a bit swellheaded from all the flattery, Gertrude remembered her suffering at the hands of her prison-keeper. Seeing her father so ready to grant her every wish but one, she sought to take advantage of this favorable juncture to appease the first of the passions that tormented her. So she expressed her great distaste at finding herself with that woman, and complained loudly about her manners.

"What!" said the Prince. "She failed to show you respect? Tomorrow I'll give her the scolding she deserves. Leave it to me, I'll remind her of who she is, and who you are. In no event should a daughter with whom I am so pleased have to lay eyes on someone

not to her liking." At this, he summoned a different woman and ordered her to serve Gertrude, who meanwhile, ruminating on and savoring the satisfaction she had received, was surprised to find how little it fulfilled her expectations. Despite herself, she was overwhelmed by how much closer that day had brought her to the cloister, and by the realization that turning back now would take more strength and determination—which she could feel were sorely lacking—than even a few days before.

The woman assigned to her chamber was an elderly member of the household, the young prince's former governess, who had taken charge of him the minute he was out of swaddling clothes, raised him until he was an adolescent, and invested in him all her pleasures, hopes, and glory. She could not have been happier with that day's decision than if it had been her own good fortune. As her final entertainment, Gertrude had to suffer the old woman's congratulations, praise, and advice, and listen to her prattle on about certain of her aunts and great-aunts who had been delighted to be nuns. As members of such a distinguished house, they had always received preferential treatment, always been able to keep one foot outside the convent, and had achieved things in their parlors that the grand dames, in their salons, could only dream of. She described the visits she would receive: One day soon, the young prince would arrive with his bride, who would most certainly be a grand signora. And on that day not only the convent but the whole town would be abuzz. The old woman kept on talking while she was undressing Gertrude, and while Gertrude lay in bed. She was still talking when Gertrude fell asleep, her thoughts overcome by youth and exhaustion. Although her sleep was troubled, agitated, and full of bad dreams, it was unbroken until the old woman's shrill voice woke her up to get ready for the trip to Monza.

"Up, up, my little bride! The day is dawning! It'll take at least an hour to get you dressed and your hair combed. The Princess is getting dressed. They woke her four hours earlier than her usual. The young prince has already gone down to the stables, come back, and is ready to leave at any moment. Quick as a hare, that little devil.

Has been ever since he was a little boy. Take it from me, who carried him in my arms. But when he's ready to go, you'd best not keep him waiting. He's good-natured, that he is, but having to wait is the one thing that'll make him lose his temper and start carrying on. Poor thing. You have to understand. It's his nature. And you can hardly blame him on a day like today, because he's going to all this trouble for you. You'd best steer clear of him when he's like this! He's got no regard for anyone, except the Prince himself. After all, the only person above him is the Prince, and one day he himself will be prince. Let's not get ahead of ourselves, though! Come, come, Signorina! Why are you looking at me in such a daze? At this hour you should already be out of the nest!"

At the image of the impatient young prince, all the other thoughts that had crowded into Gertrude's awakening mind took off like a flock of sparrows at the sight of a hawk. She obeyed, dressed quickly, allowed her hair to be combed, and made her appearance in the drawing room, where her parents and brother were already assembled. She was seated in the place of honor, and offered a cup of hot chocolate, the equivalent in those days of the toga virilis for the ancient Romans.*

When the announcement arrived that the carriage was ready, the Prince drew his daughter to the side and said, "Now, Gertrude. Yesterday you were a credit to yourself. Today you have to do even more. It's a question of making a solemn appearance at the convent in the town where you are destined to be a leading citizen. They are waiting for you . . ." Needless to say, the Prince had notified the abbess the day before. "They are waiting for you, and all eyes will be upon you. Dignity and self-assurance. The abbess will ask you why you are there: It's a formality. You should respond that you are requesting admission to the convent, to wear the veil in the place where you received such a loving education, and where you were treated with such courtesy. Which is the God's honest truth. Say

* In ancient Rome the plain white toga virilis was donned by a teenage boy as a symbol of his coming of age and progress to full citizenship.

these few words in a relaxed manner. You don't want people to think you're just repeating things that were put in your mouth, or that you can't speak your own mind. The good sisters know nothing about what happened. It's a secret that must remain buried in the family. So don't go looking contrite or hesitant, which might raise suspicions. Show them your breeding: well-mannered, modest. But remember that there, away from the family, no one will be your superior."

Without awaiting a reply, the Prince started to leave. Gertrude, the Princess, and the young prince followed him. They all descended the palace stairs and climbed into the carriage. The troubles and annoyances of the world, and the blissful life in the convent, especially for girls of noble blood, were the subjects of conversation during the trip. Near the end of the road, the Prince renewed his instructions to his daughter, and repeated to her over and over the formula for the expected response. As they entered Monza, Gertrude felt her heart sink. She was momentarily distracted when a cluster of gentlemen (I don't know their names) stopped the carriage to pay some sort of customary homage (which I also don't know). Then their journey to the convent resumed at a snail's pace, amid the gawking of the curious, who came running from every direction. When the carriage came to a halt, before that familiar wall, before that familiar gate, Gertrude could feel her heart sinking even lower. She alighted between two rows of onlookers that the servants held back. Every eye was on the poor girl, making her painfully aware of her every move. But what made her most uneasy, more than all these eyes put together, were the eyes of her father, whose gaze, despite her terror, she could not avert for even a second. And those eyes, like invisible reins, controlled her movements and her expression. Once she had crossed the first courtyard, she entered another from which she could see the gate to the inner cloister, opened wide, and filled up with nuns. In the first row was the abbess, surrounded by the older nuns. In the next, an assortment of other nuns, some on tiptoe. At the very back were lay sisters standing on footstools. Here and there you could see the

glimmer of some brighter eyes, some faces that stood out from among the habits: They were the bravest and sharpest of the schoolgirls who, by poking and squeezing their way between the nuns, had managed to open up a space so that they, too, could enjoy the spectacle. A clamor arose from that crowd and arms could be seen waving to signal their welcome and their joy. They had arrived at the door. Gertrude found herself face-to-face with the Mother Abbess. After some initial greetings, the latter asked, with a mixture of gaiety and solemnity, what Gertrude desired in that place, where no one could deny her anything.

"I am here," Gertrude began. But on the verge of uttering the words that would irrevocably seal her fate, she hesitated for a moment and stared into the crowd assembled before her. And in that moment she saw one of her old schoolmates, staring at her with both pity and malice, as if to say, "So, you didn't have the pluck to resist!" That sight inflamed her old feelings and also restored a little of her old courage. She was already searching for a response other than the one that had been dictated to her, when she looked up at her father, as if to test her mettle. In his face she detected such a dark apprehension, such a menacing impatience, that she changed her mind as quickly as you'd flee a terrifying object. She then said, "I am here to request admission to wear the religious habit, in this convent, where I was raised so lovingly." The abbess replied at once, saying how sorry she was, on such an occasion, that the rules would not allow her to give an immediate answer, which had to come from the general vote of the sisters and be approved by the ecclesiastical authorities, but that Gertrude, knowing how everyone felt about her there, could predict the answer with certainty. And in the meantime, no rule forbade the abbess and the nuns from expressing their joy at her request. At that a clamor of congratulations and applause arose. Large trays piled high with sweets appeared, and were presented first to the little bride and then to her parents. While some nuns fawned over her, others complimented the mother, and still others the young prince, the abbess conveyed an invitation to the Prince to approach the grate of the parlor,

where she would be waiting for him. She was accompanied by two elderly nuns. "Your Lordship," she began, "to honor the rules . . . to discharge an indispensable formality, although in this case . . . still it is my duty to tell you . . . that every time a daughter asks to take the veil . . . the Mother Superior, of whom I am the unworthy . . . is required to advise the parents . . . that if, by any chance . . . they had forced the daughter against her will, they would be excommunicated. My deepest apologies . . ."

"Excellent, Reverend Mother, excellent. I admire your scrupulousness. It is quite appropriate . . . But how can you doubt . . ."

"Please understand, your Lordship . . . I have spoken as I am required to . . . Besides which . . ."

"Of course, Mother Abbess, of course."

Having exchanged these few words, they bowed to each other and took their leave, in mutual discomfort. And each went back to join his or her respective group, one beyond, the other within the threshold of the cloister. After a little more small talk: "Come, come," said the Prince, "Gertrude will soon be able to enjoy the company of the good sisters at her leisure. We have inconvenienced them enough for now." At this he made a bow, and the family followed suit, renewed their compliments, and left.

Gertrude had no desire to speak on the way back home. Terrified by the step she had taken, ashamed of her ineptitude, annoyed at both herself and others, she made a grim count of the occasions left for her to say no, and promised herself, vaguely and feebly, that on one of those occasions, she would be stronger and more adept. Despite these thoughts, her fear of her father's scowl had not subsided in the least. She stole a glance at him and could tell that every trace of anger was gone from his face. When she saw that he appeared to be quite satisfied with her, she felt that it was good, and, for a moment, was happy as can be.

Once home, they had to freshen up and change; then there was lunch, then visitors, then the trottata, then the reception, then dinner. After all of this, the Prince brought up another matter: the choice of a sponsor. That's what they called the lady who, at the

parents' request, became the guardian and chaperone of the young postulant in the period between the request and the admission into the convent: a period that was spent visiting churches, public palaces, receptions, country estates, shrines: all the most notable things in the city and its environs, in short, so that girls, before making an irrevocable vow, could have a good look at what they were leaving behind.

"We will need to think of a sponsor," said the Prince, "because tomorrow the vicar of the nuns will be here, for the formality of the examination, and immediately after that Gertrude's name will be submitted to the chapter of nuns for their acceptance." At this, he turned toward the Princess. Believing he was asking for her advice, she started to say, "Well, there is . . ." but the Prince interrupted her. "No, no, your Ladyship. The sponsor should above all be a person whom the little bride likes. And while it is traditionally the parent's decision, Gertrude is so wise, so sensible, that she has earned the right to an exception." Here, turning toward Gertrude, as if to bestow a special favor, he continued, "Each of the ladies who came to our reception this evening has the qualifications to sponsor a daughter of our house. There is no one, I daresay, who would not feel honored to be selected: The choice is yours."

Gertrude could see that making this choice was yet another form of consent. But the proposal was made with such ceremony that to reject it, however humbly, might seem disrespectful, or, at the very least, fickle and coy. So she took yet another step forward, and gave the name of the lady who had appealed to her the most that evening. The one, that is to say, who had fawned over her the most, flattered her the most, and treated her with the affectionate and caring familiarity that, in the early moments of an acquaintance, masquerades as an old friendship.

"Excellent choice," said the Prince, who had wanted and expected that same lady. It was like a card trick played by a magician. He fans a deck of cards before your eyes, tells you to think of one, and then guesses which card it was; but, whether by chance or design, he had fanned them out in such a way that you only saw one.

That lady had hovered about Gertrude the whole evening, and so monopolized her that the girl would have needed a leap of the imagination to think of anyone else. Nor were these attentions so innocent. The lady had long set her eyes on the young prince as a future son-in-law. So she already regarded the affairs of that house as her own and, of course, cared as much for dear Gertrude as she did for her closest relatives.

The next day, Gertrude woke up thinking of the examiner who was scheduled to come. While ruminating on if and how best to seize this decisive occasion to turn back, she was summoned by the Prince.

"Now child," he began, "up until this point you have behaved admirably. Today you have to coronate the endeavor. Everything done so far has been done with your consent. If any doubts, any regrets, any youthful whims had crossed your mind, you should have said so. But it's too late now for any mischief. The honest man who is coming today will ask you a hundred questions about your vocation: whether you are becoming a nun of your own free will, and why, and how, and what not. If you hem and haw in your answers, who knows how long he might go on. For you it would be annoying, or rather, agonizing. What's worse, after all the public displays, the least hesitation on your part would compromise my honor. People might think I had mistaken one of your whims for a firm decision, that I had rushed this business, that I had . . . Who knows what they might think? In that case, I would find myself having to choose between two painful options: either to let society form an unfortunate opinion of my conduct, which I do not deserve in any manner, shape, or form; or reveal the true reason for your decision, and . . ." Seeing that Gertrude had turned crimson, her eyes were swelling, and her face was shrinking like a flower in the sweltering heat before a storm, he dropped the subject and, in a calmer tone of voice, said: "Come now, everything depends on you and your good judgment. I know how smart you are, and that you're not the type of girl who would spoil something at the end that had started out so well. So not another word about this. We shall agree

that you will answer frankly, in such a way as not to plant any doubts in the head of that righteous man. In this way you'll get it over with more quickly."

At this point, after suggesting answers to the most likely questions, he resumed his usual talk about the delights and pleasures that awaited Gertrude in the convent. And he continued in this vein until a servant appeared to announce the arrival of the vicar. The Prince quickly repeated his main warnings, then he left his daughter alone with the man in accordance with the rules.

The righteous man came somewhat predisposed to believe that Gertrude had a strong vocation for the cloister, since this is what the Prince had told him when he issued the invitation. The good priest knew that skepticism was one of the main requirements of his office, and he made it a rule to distrust similar claims and beware of preconceived notions. But the forthright assertions of a person of authority, on any subject, rarely leave the listener's mind untainted.

After the initial greetings, "Signorina," he said, "I have come here to play the devil's advocate. I have come to cast doubt on the certainties that you have provided in your application. I have come to show you the difficulties of this life and to ascertain that you have considered them carefully. Will you allow me to ask you a few questions?"

"Please do," replied Gertrude.

The good priest then began to question her in the prescribed form. "In your heart do you feel a free, spontaneous resolution to become a nun? Have you received threats or enticements? Have you been threatened by any authority to force you into this? Please speak freely and honestly to a man whose duty it is to know your true will, in order to prevent you from being subjected to any type of coercion."

The true answer to that question leapt to Gertrude's mind with a terrifying clarity. To give that answer, she would have to explain what had happened, say who had threatened her, tell the story . . . The unhappy girl shrank from this idea in fear. She hastened to find another answer, and found only one, the one farthest from the truth,

which would free her from that torment swiftly and surely. "I am becoming a nun," she said, hiding her agitation, "I am becoming a nun of my own free will."

"How long have you felt this way?" the good priest continued his questioning.

"For as long as I can remember," replied Gertrude, who once she had taken that first step, had become better at lying to herself.

"What is your main reason for wanting to become a nun?"

The good priest did not realize what a terrible nerve he had touched. Gertrude made a great effort to keep her face from revealing the effect of those words on her spirit. "The reason," she said, "is to serve God and to escape the dangers of the world."

"Could it not be a feeling of revulsion instead? Or . . . forgive me . . . a whim? Sometimes a moment's reason might seem permanent, but when that reason ceases to exist, you change your mind, and then . . ."

"No, no," Gertrude quickly replied. "The reason is the one I gave you."

The vicar, more from a sense of duty than any belief that there was a need, pressed on with his questions. But now Gertrude was determined to deceive him. In addition to her revulsion at the idea of revealing her weakness to that austere and righteous man, who seemed to harbor no suspicions of her, the poor girl knew that while he could prevent her from becoming a nun, his authority over her, and his protection, would end here. Once he was gone, she would be alone with the Prince. And no matter what she came to suffer in that house, the good priest would know nothing of it, or, if he did, with even the best intentions, he could do little more than feel pity for her, the peaceful, moderate pity generally accorded, as a courtesy, to anyone who has given a reason or an excuse for the wrongs they suffer.

The examiner grew tired of questioning the unfortunate girl before she grew tired of lying. Hearing the consistency of her answers, and finding no reason to doubt their sincerity, he finally changed his tone. Congratulating her, he apologized, in a manner,

for having taken so long to perform his duty. He added a few words of encouragement to support her good intentions, and took his leave.

As he was crossing the antechambers, he ran into the Prince, who seemed to be there by chance. The priest complimented him on the excellent disposition he had found in the Prince's daughter. Until that moment the Prince had been in a state of painful suspense. At the news he breathed a sigh of relief. Forgetting his customary severity, he almost ran to Gertrude, and showered her with praise, with hugs, with promises, with a cordial jubilation, and with a tenderness that was mostly sincere: Such is the muddle of the human heart.

I shall not accompany Gertrude on her tour of sights and entertainments. Nor shall I describe, in detail and in order, her feelings during that time. It would be a story of sorrow and mood swings, too monotonous and too similar to what I have already related.

The charms of the places, the variety of the objects, the simple pleasure of moving about in the open air, made her detest even more the idea of the place where she would alight for the last time, and forever. More painful still were the impressions she gathered at the receptions and balls. The sight of "brides" who were given this title in the more common, obvious sense of the word filled her with envy and an unbearable anguish; and sometimes the appearance of a young man made her feel that to be called by that title herself would be the peak of happiness. Sometimes the luxury of the palaces, the splendor of the decorations, the joyful hustle and bustle of the balls, so elated her and made her yearn for a life of gaiety that she swore to withdraw her request, to suffer anything rather than go back to the cold, dead shadows of the cloister. But all those resolutions evaporated when she collected her thoughts and pondered how hard it would be, or when she simply looked her father in the face. And sometimes, the thought of having to abandon those pleasures forever made this small taste more bitter, more painful, like a thirsty patient who glares at and almost scornfully rejects the teaspoon of water that the doctor reluctantly allows him.

Meanwhile the vicar of nuns had issued the necessary certification, and permission was granted to call a meeting of the chapter of nuns for the acceptance of Gertrude into the order. The chapter was held: As expected, the required two-thirds of the secret votes were in favor, and Gertrude was accepted. She herself, tired of the long torment, asked to enter the convent as soon as possible. There was certainly no one who would stand in her way, so her wish was granted. Conducted to the convent with great ceremony, she donned the habit. After a twelve-month novitiate, filled with regrets and regret for her regrets, the time came for her to take her vows, the time ordained to either utter a *no* that would be stranger, more unexpected, and more scandalous than ever, or repeat the *yes* already said so many times. She repeated it, and became a nun, forever.

One of the unique and incommunicable powers of the Christian faith is its ability to guide and console anyone, in any circumstance, and at any time, who turns to it. If there is a way to correct past misdeeds, the Faith prescribes it, administers it, and provides the light and strength to apply it, whatever the cost. If there is not, it finds a way to actually and effectively do what the proverb says, and make of necessity a virtue. It teaches us to continue with wisdom that which was begun almost lightheartedly. It persuades the soul to embrace willingly something imposed by force, and endows a choice that was rash, but irrevocable, with all the sanctity, all the wisdom, and, let us say openly, all the joy of the vocation. No matter the labyrinth or the precipice from which a man has come, the moment he sets foot on this path he can walk safely and willingly and arrive joyfully at a joyful end.

In this way, Gertrude could have become a nun who was pious and content, despite the manner in which she took the veil. But instead, the unhappy girl tried to shake off the yoke, and consequently suffered even more under its weight and its jolts. Endless regret for her lost freedom, hatred of her present state, and an all-consuming yearning for desires that would never be requited: This is how she occupied her mind. She brooded over her bitter past,

recollected all the circumstances that had brought her there, and a thousand times undid in her mind, to no avail, what she had done through her actions. She accused herself of ineptitude, and others of tyranny and treachery. And she wasted away. She both idolized and lamented her beauty, deplored a youth that was destined to fade away in a slow agony, and envied, at times, any woman, of any status, or any morals, who could freely enjoy these gifts in the world.

She detested the nuns who had taken her hand and led her in. She remembered the cunning and the tricks they had adopted, and repaid them with rudeness, with teasing, and even with open criticism. Most of the time they thought it best to put up with her in silence: The Prince had tyrannized his daughter just enough to force her into the cloister, but once he had achieved his goal, he would not easily tolerate others trying to get the better of his own blood. Any complaint they made could lead to the loss of his patronage, or even turn their patron into an enemy.

You might think that Gertrude would be better inclined toward the nuns who had played no part in those intrigues and who, without having wanted her as a companion, still loved her as one of their own. Pious, diligent, and cheerful, their example showed her how one could not only live, but also thrive, within the walls. Yet she hated them, too, for another reason. In their piety and good cheer she saw a criticism of her restless and eccentric behavior. She never missed an opportunity to make fun of them behind their backs as bigots, or to accuse them of being hypocrites. Her feelings toward them might have been less hostile if she had known or guessed that these same women were the ones who had cast the only votes against her acceptance into the convent.

The little consolation she did seem to find, at times, was in giving orders, receiving courtesy visits from outside persons, bestowing a favor, extending her protection, and in hearing herself called "La Signora." But what consolations were these? Her heart, so unfulfilled, would have occasionally liked to lengthen this list, and add the consolations of religion. But its consolations cannot be enjoyed

unless the others are abandoned: Like the shipwrecked man, he must let go of the seaweed he had seized in a furious instinct if he wishes to grab onto the plank that will lead him to safety and the shore.

Shortly after taking her vows, Gertrude became the school mistress. Now you can imagine how those young girls must have fared in a school like hers. Her old confidants were all gone, but her grudges from those days were alive and well, and, one way or another, her pupils had to bear the brunt. Whenever it crossed her mind that many of them were destined to live in a world shut off from her forever, she felt a resentment and, at times, a desire for revenge toward her girls. So she humiliated them, mistreated them, made them pay in advance for the pleasures they would one day enjoy. In moments like those, anyone who heard the magisterial scorn with which she berated them for the least infraction would have thought her a woman of savage, excessive spirituality.

At other times, her aversion for the cloister, for the rules, for the vow of obedience, would explode into tantrums of the opposite humor. Then she would not only tolerate her pupils' rowdiness but encourage it, joining in their games and making them more unruly than ever. She would intrude into their conversations and lead them in directions beyond their original intentions. If anyone had a word to say about the Mother Abbess's droning, the teacher would imitate it at length, turning it into a scene from a comedy. She would mimic one nun's facial expression, another's style of walking. Then she would let out a boisterous laugh, but this laughter left her feeling no happier than before. She went on in this manner for several years, finding neither the leisure nor the opportunity to make her disdain any clearer, until, to her misfortune, an opportunity appeared.

Among the other distinctions and privileges granted to Gertrude was her own separate suite, to compensate for not being abbess. Her side of the convent abutted a house inhabited by a young man, a criminal by trade, one of the many, in those days, who thanks to their henchmen and their association with other criminals could,

to an extent, scoff at the police and the law. Our manuscript only gives his first name, Egidio, without mentioning his family. From a window that overlooked a courtyard in that corner of the convent, he sometimes saw Gertrude walking by or wandering around. One day, tempted rather than frightened by the danger and the impiety of the endeavor, he dared to call out to her. And she gave her fateful reply.

At first she felt a happiness that, while it was certainly not pure, was very much alive. The tedious void in her spirit was now filled with a strong and constant occupation and, I would almost say, a powerful life. But that happiness was like the restorative drink that the ancients, in their ingenious cruelty, used to pour for a condemned man, to give him the strength to survive longer under torture. At the same time, a great change could be seen in her behavior. She suddenly became more settled, more peaceful. She stopped her teasing and grumbling, and indeed showed herself to be affectionate and considerate. The sisters rejoiced at this happy turn, little suspecting the true reason, or realizing that her newfound virtue was nothing more than the addition of hypocrisy to her old flaws. This outward appearance, however, this whitewashed façade, did not last long, at least not with continuity and consistency. Soon her usual insults and whims were back, and her curses and derision of the cloistered prison could be heard, sometimes expressed in language unfamiliar to that place, and even to those lips. But each of these outbursts was followed by remorse, by efforts to make people forget them through flattery and kind words. The sisters tolerated these mood swings as best they could, blaming them on the Signora's eccentric and fickle nature.

For a while no one seemed to give the Signora too much thought. But one day she berated a lay sister over some trifle, and mistreated her so excessively, so relentlessly, that the girl, after putting up with it and biting her lip, finally lost her patience and blurted out that she knew something, and that at the right time and place she would talk. From that moment on, the Signora knew no peace. One morning, however, the lay sister failed to appear for her usual duties. The

nuns went looking for her in her cell, but she wasn't there. They called out her name. She didn't answer. They searched here and there, round and round, high and low. She was nowhere to be found.

Who knows what people might have imagined if, in the middle of the search, they had not discovered a breach in the garden wall. This made everyone assume she had slipped through it. A search was carried out in Monza and the outlying areas, mainly in Meda, the girl's hometown. Letters were dispatched to various other districts, but not even a shred of news came back. They might have learned more if, rather than searching far and wide, they had dug a little closer to home. With much dismay, since no one thought her capable of such a thing, and after much talk, the conclusion was reached that she must have gone far, far away. And since one nun declared that "She's definitely fled to Holland," it was immediately said, and long believed, both inside the convent and out, that she had fled to Holland. The Signora, however, did not seem to share this belief. Not that she expressed her doubts, or gave any particular reasons for disagreeing with the general opinion: She indeed had her reasons, but she kept them concealed. Nor was there anything that she avoided more readily than stirring up that story again, or that seemed to interest her less than getting to the bottom of that mystery. But the less she spoke about it, the more she thought about it. How many times a day did the image of that girl suddenly invade her thoughts, and plant itself there without budging! How many times did she wish she could see her in the flesh, alive and well, rather than haunting her thoughts, rather than being accompanied, day and night, by that ghostly, frightening, stone-cold shape! How many times did she wish she could hear her voice, no matter what it might threaten, rather than always having in her mind's ear the imaginary whispering of that same voice, and hearing words repeated with an insistence, with a relentless tenacity, beyond the power of any living soul!

—

Almost one year had gone by since that incident when Lucia was introduced to the Signora and had the conversation with her that I

interrupted to tell you this tale. The Signora asked her more and more questions about Don Rodrigo's harassment, and pried into certain details with a boldness that surprised Lucia, and understandably so, for she had never imagined that nuns might be so curious about such subjects. No less strange were the comments that the Signora sprinkled or insinuated into her questions. She seemed to be mocking the revulsion Lucia had always felt for that gentleman, and asked whether he really was such a monster to have provoked such fear. She acted as if the young girl's aversion was unreasonable or foolish, except for the fact that she preferred Renzo, of whom she also had some questions that left the girl shocked and embarrassed. Realizing that she may have let her tongue run away with her, the Signora tried to correct her lapse and more properly express herself. But Lucia could not help but be left with an unpleasant dismay and a puzzled surprise.

As soon as Lucia was alone with her mother, she confided her feelings to her. But Agnese, as the more experienced of the two, solved all her doubts with a few words, explaining the whole mystery. "Don't be surprised," she said. "When you know the world as well as I do, you'll see that there's nothing to be surprised at. Nobles are all a little bit mad: some more, some less, some in one way, some in another. It's best to just let them talk, especially when you need them. Pretend that you're taking them seriously, as if they were saying reasonable things. Did you hear how she jumped down my throat, as if I'd said something completely improper? I paid her no mind. They're all the same. Anyway, thank heavens this Signora seems to have taken a liking to you, and really does want to protect you. If you make it through this alive, my daughter, and happen to deal with nobles again, oh the things that you'll hear! The things that you'll hear!"

The Signora was genuinely predisposed to take the fate of the two poor refugees to heart by virtue of her wish to gratify the Father Guardian the satisfaction of being able to grant her protection, the thought of the good image she would gain through such a saintly favor, a certain sympathy for Lucia, and also a feeling of relief in

doing a good deed for an innocent child, by aiding and consoling the oppressed. At her request, and out of respect for her, mother and daughter were lodged in the stewardess's quarters, adjacent to the cloister, and treated as if they were servants of the convent. Agnese and Lucia rejoiced that they had so quickly found a safe and respectable shelter. They would have been even happier to be ignored by all, but that was not easy in a convent. Especially since there was a man quite eager to get news about one of them, a man whose earlier passion and obstinacy had been thwarted and disappointed, leaving him rankled. And we, leaving behind the women in their refuge, shall return to his palace, at the hour in which he was awaiting the outcome of his vile expedition.

Chapter 11

Like a pack of bloodhounds that, having chased a hare in vain, return to their master, humiliated, heads hanging and tails between their legs, the bravi returned to Don Rodrigo's palace on that night of tricks and treachery. He was pacing back and forth, in the dark, in a large empty room on the top floor that overlooked the terrace. Every now and then he would stop, listen, and look between the slats of the worm-eaten shutters. He was filled with impatience and measurable apprehension, not only because of his uncertainty over the outcome but also because of the possible consequences, since this was the biggest and riskiest thing the brave and valiant man had ever attempted. He kept reassuring himself, however, with thoughts of the precautions he had taken to destroy the evidence if not the suspicions.

"Suspicions?" he thought. "I scoff at them. I'd like to meet the lovesick fool who'd dare to come up here to see whether I've got the girl. Let the lowlife come. He'll get the welcome he deserves! Let the friar come. And the old woman? Off to Bergamo with her. The law? What law! The Mayor is neither a child nor a fool. And in Milan? Who'd want to take them in there? Who'd pay them any mind? Who even knows them? They're lost souls. They don't even have a master: They belong to no one. Come now, there's nothing to be afraid of. I can't wait to see the look on Attilio's face tomorrow morning! He'll see if I'm all talk and no action. And then . . . if there were any problems, such as, I don't know, some enemy who wants to take this opportunity . . . Attilio will have some words of advice, too. After all, our family honor is at stake." But the thought on

which he dwelled the most, because it both quieted his doubts and fed his obsession, was the thought of the cajoling, the promises he would use to soothe Lucia. "She'll be so scared to find herself here all alone, surrounded by those ugly mugs—the most human face here is mine, by God—that she'll have to run to me, to beg. And she will beg."

While making these calculations, he hears clattering, goes to the window, opens it a crack, and sticks his head out. It's them. "And the sedan chair? Damn it, where's the sedan chair? Three, five, eight . . . everyone's here. Griso, too. But no sedan chair. Damn! Griso's got some explaining to do!"

Once they were inside, Griso set his walking stick, old hat, and cloak in the corner of a ground-floor room and, as required by his job—which no one envied in that moment—he went upstairs to do some explaining to Don Rodrigo, who was waiting at the top. Seeing Griso appear with the inept, sheepish look of a thwarted criminal, "Well?" he said, or rather shouted, "Mr. Braggart, Mr. Capitano, Mr. *Leaveituptome*?"

"It ain't easy," answered Griso, one foot still on the first step, "it ain't easy getting reprimanded after trying your loyal best to do your duty and risking your neck while you're at it."

"What happened? Come on, out with it," said Don Rodrigo as he headed toward his chambers. Griso followed him and immediately delivered his report of what he had arranged, done, seen and not seen, heard, feared, and fixed. And he did it with the order and confusion, doubtfulness and dismay, that also reigned over his thoughts.

"You did the right thing," said Don Rodrigo, "you did what you could. But . . . what if I've got a spy under my roof! If I come to find out I do, and we discover who he is, I'll take care of him. I can tell you, Griso, I'll make him pay."

"The same suspicion crossed my mind," said Griso. "If it's true, and if we do find a rat like that, then hand him over to me, master. He got his laughs putting me through a night like that! I'd like the chance to pay him back. But a few things make me think some other

plot was underway, I'm not sure exactly what right now. Tomorrow, my lord, tomorrow it'll all be clear."

"Tell me that at least no one recognized you."

Griso answered that he hoped not. Their conversation ended with three orders from Don Rodrigo for the next day, orders that Griso could have easily given himself. Two men were to be sent early in the morning to deliver a warning to the Consul, which they did, as we have seen; two others were to guard the abandoned house, keep away any idler that might happen to come by, and hide the sedan chair until the next night, when they could bring it back, since for the time being it was best to avoid suspicious movements. And finally, Griso himself was to go, along with a couple of his most calm and levelheaded men, to mingle with the people and try to dig up information about the havoc of that night. After giving these orders, Don Rodrigo went to bed and gave Griso his leave, too, saying good night with heaps of praise that clearly expressed his wish to compensate for the insults with which he had greeted him earlier.

Time to sleep, poor Griso. I'm sure you need it. Poor Griso! Busy all day, busy half the night, not to mention the danger of falling into the villagers' grips or ending up with a bounty on your head *per rapto di donna honesta,* in addition to the ones you already have. And then to be welcomed back like that! No good deed goes unpunished. But, in this instance, you could see that while justice may sometimes lag at the beginning, it does eventually arrive, even in this world. Go to sleep now. Because one day soon, you might be summoned to tackle another, more formidable task.

The next morning, Griso was already out and about when Don Rodrigo rose. The nobleman immediately went looking for Count Attilio who, upon his appearance, made a taunting face and gesture, saying, "It's the Feast of Saint Martin! Time to pay up!"

"I don't know what to say," replied Don Rodrigo, coming up to him. "I'll pay the bet, but that's not what burns me. I didn't say anything to you because, I admit, I thought I might surprise you this morning. Well . . . enough. Now I'll tell you everything."

"It was that monk sticking his nose into our business," offered his cousin, after he'd heard the whole story, with greater seriousness than you might have expected from such an eccentric figure. "That monk," he continued, "with his pussy-cat manners and foolish ideas, he's nothing but a smart aleck and a busybody. And you didn't trust me. You never told me what he came here to cook up the other day."

Don Rodrigo described their conversation.

"And you put up with it, letting him leave the same way that he came?" exclaimed Count Attilio.

"What? Did you want me to incur the wrath of all the Capuchins in Italy?"

"In a moment like that," said Count Attilio, "I don't know whether I would've remembered that there were any other Capuchins in the world besides that insolent rascal. But come now, even within the rules of prudence, is there no way to get the better of a Capuchin? You have to know when to be especially kind to the whole body in order to attack a single member with impunity. Enough. He escaped the punishment he had coming to him. But I'll take him under my protection. I want the satisfaction of teaching him how to speak to people of our class."

"You'll only make things worse."

"Trust me, for once, and I'll be both relative and friend to you."

"What do you have in mind?"

"I'm not sure yet, but I'll definitely give that friar what he deserves. Let me think about it and . . . wait, there's my uncle, the Count, on the Secret Council! He can handle him for me. My dear Count Uncle! I love getting him to do my dirty work, a bigwig like him! I'll be in Milan the day after tomorrow, and one way or other, the friar will get what he deserves."

In the meantime, breakfast had arrived, but it did not interrupt the discussion of this important matter. Count Attilio spoke freely and, although he performed the role demanded by his friendship with his cousin and by the honor of their shared name—according to his own notions of friendship and honor—he couldn't help but

laugh to himself at his cousin's glorious fiasco. But Don Rodrigo, whose name was at stake, was roiled by deeper passions and distracted by more vexing thoughts. He thought he could pull off the big coup in silence and had failed to do so clamorously.

"Can you imagine the lies that those lowlifes will spread everywhere?" he said. "What do I care? As for the law? I laugh at it. They've got no proof. Even if they did, I'd still laugh. For good measure, this morning I warned the Consul not to report what happened. Nothing would come of it. But rumors annoy me when they go on for too long. It's bad enough that I was fooled so brutally."

"You did the right thing," replied Count Attilio. "That mayor of yours—that big stubborn, stupid, pain in the neck of a mayor—is still an honest man, a man who knows his duty. And when you're dealing with people like that, you have to be careful not to create trouble for them. If some rascal of a consul makes a report, the Mayor, with all the good intentions in the world, still has to—"

"You're one to talk!" Don Rodrigo broke in, irritated. "Always contradicting him about everything, shouting at him, and even ridiculing him if you feel like it. Spoiling my best-laid plans! For crying out loud, how can a mayor be a stubborn mule and an honest man at the same time?"

"You know, dear Cousin," said Count Attilio, looking at him with surprise, "I'm starting to think you're a little afraid. You're even taking the Mayor seriously!"

"Oh, come now, weren't you the one who said we have to keep him happy?"

"I did. And when it comes to serious business, I'll show you I'm no boy. You know how far I'll go for you? I'm the type of man who'll call on the Mayor myself. Will he appreciate the honor? And I'm the type of man who'll let him talk for half an hour about the Count-Duke, about our Spanish castellan, ready to agree with everything he says, even when he's talking complete rubbish. Then I'll slip in a word or two about the Count Uncle, on the Secret Council, and you know how those words will sound to the Mayor's ears! When all is said and done, he needs our protection more than

you need his indulgence. I'll do a good deed and go there, and leave him better disposed to you than ever."

After these words and more of the same, Count Attilio left to go hunting. Don Rodrigo stayed behind, anxiously awaiting the return of Griso, who finally arrived, at suppertime, to deliver his report.

The havoc of that night had created such an uproar, and the disappearance of three people from a small village was such an event, that the searches—driven by a sense of both urgency and curiosity—were many, heated, and insistent. On the other hand, too many people had a piece of the puzzle for everyone to agree to keep quiet. Perpetua couldn't appear on her doorstop without being assailed by someone or other, to get her to say who had given her master such a fright. Thinking back on the circumstances, she was finally able to figure out that she had been duped by Agnese, which made her so mad that she simply had to let off some steam. Not that she went around complaining to the world of how she had been duped. On that she didn't breathe a word. But she couldn't keep quiet about the trick played on her poor master, especially one hatched and carried out by that upright young man, that saintly widow, and that goody two-shoes. Don Abbondio could order her sternly or beg her politely to be quiet, and she could repeat that there was no need to tell her something so plain and clear. But the secret locked in the poor woman's heart was so big that, like a loosely hooped old barrel filled with a gurgling, bubbling, fermenting young wine, if the tap didn't blow off, every stave was bound to creak and leak and drip so much that, soon enough, you'd be able to name the wine inside.

Gervaso, who could scarcely believe that for once he was better informed than everyone else, thought it glorious to have suffered such a scare, and felt as if having had a hand in something that reeked of criminality made him a man like the others, was dying to boast about it. And although Tonio, who was worried about inquiries and possible trials and explanations, ordered him at fist-point to keep his mouth shut, there was still no way to stifle every word from his mouth. For that matter, Tonio himself, after being out that

night at such an unusual hour, coming home with such an unusual gait and demeanor, and with an agitation that made him inclined to honesty, could not hide the fact from his wife, who was in turn no mute. The one who spoke the least was Menico, because as soon as he told his parents the story and the reasons for his expedition, they were so terrified that their son had helped foil a plot by Don Rodrigo that they barely let him finish his story. They immediately issued him the sternest and most threatening order to not even hint at what had happened to anyone. The next morning, still not feeling safe, they decided to keep him locked up at home for the day, and then for a few days more. To no avail! Because while his parents were chatting with fellow villagers a little later, without intending to boast, they themselves spilled the hitherto mysterious details of our friends' escape, as well as the how, the why, and the where, adding, as if it were common knowledge, that the three had found sanctuary in Pescarenico. And so this fact, too, made its way into the village gossip.

With all these scraps of news pieced and sewn together and the embellishments that inevitably get added on in the process, a story emerged with enough certainty and clarity to satisfy even the most skeptical minds. But the invasion of the bravi—an incident too serious and too raucous to ignore—complicated the whole affair. Everyone agreed that Don Rodrigo was behind it. The rest was all mystery and opposing conjectures. There was much talk of the two bravi who had been seen on the street toward nightfall, and of the one standing at the tavern door. But did this simple fact illuminate anything? The tavern-keeper was questioned to find out who had been at his establishment the night before. But, if he was to be believed, he did not even remember whether he had seen people that night, and was careful to say that a tavern is like a seaport, with people coming in and out.

What most confounded people and upset their conjectures was Stefano's and Carlandrea's sighting of a pilgrim, who the criminals wanted to murder, and who had either gone with or been kidnapped by them. What was he doing there? Was he a soul from Purgatory

that had appeared to help the women? The condemned soul of a villain posing as a pilgrim who came by night to be united with those who were committing the same crimes that he had in his lifetime? Or was he a real flesh-and-blood pilgrim that they wanted to kill, for fear that he would shout and wake up the village? Or (can you believe what people will think!) was he actually one of the crooks, disguised as a pilgrim? He was this, he was that, he was so many things that all of Griso's wisdom and experience would not have sufficed to discover who he was, if he had been forced to reconstruct the story on the basis of the rumors in town. As the reader knows, however, what was most confusing for others was the very thing that was clearest to him. Using it as the key to interpret the bits and pieces of information he had gathered himself, or through his underlings, he was able to compose a fairly detailed report for Don Rodrigo.

Griso informed his master of the trick the poor couple had attempted—explaining the empty house and the ringing of the church bell—which eliminated any suspicions of a traitor in their midst and confirmed what the two upstanding gentlemen had said. He informed him of the escape, which was also easy to explain: the couple's fear at getting caught in the wrong, unless they had received some warning of the invasion when the village was in an uproar. In conclusion, he said that they had found sanctuary in Pescarenico. And that's as far as his knowledge went.

Don Rodrigo was pleased to know for certain that no one had betrayed him, and that nothing could be traced to him, but his pleasure was fleeting and brief. "They fled together!" he cried. "Together! And that rascal of a monk!" The name stuck in his throat and rattled between his teeth, which were biting his finger. His expression was as brutal as his passion. "That friar will pay for this! Griso! Doesn't he know who I am? . . . I want to know, I want to find . . . I want to know where they are tonight! I won't rest! To Pescarenico, immediately! To know! To see! To find! . . . Here's four scudi now, and my protection forever. I have to know by tonight. And that rascal, that friar . . ."

Once more unto the breach for Griso. That same night, he was able to bring his worthy master the coveted news. Let me tell you how he managed.

One of the greatest consolations in life is friendship. And one of the consolations of friendship is having someone in whom to confide a secret. But friends don't come in pairs, like married couples. Each of us generally has more than one, which forms a chain whose end no one can trace. So when a friend secures the consolation of trusting a secret to another friend, he makes that friend want to seek the same consolation himself. He begs him not to tell a soul, it's true, and if this condition were to be strictly observed, it would immediately cut off the flow of consolation. According to general practice, however, the secret should not be confided, except to another equally trusted friend and under the same conditions. So from trusted friend to trusted friend, the secret travels the length of that immense chain until it reaches the ear of the very person or persons whom the first person did not want to hear it. This would normally take a very long time, if everyone had only two friends: the one who tells and the one who repeats the thing that should not be told. But there are privileged men who have hundreds of friends, and when the secret reaches one of them, the rounds become so quick and so many that it is no longer possible to keep track of it.

Our author could not ascertain how many mouths had traded the secret that Griso had been ordered to dig up. The fact of the matter is that at around four-thirty in the afternoon, as he was returning to Pescarenico in his cart, the good man who had escorted the women to Monza ran into a trusted friend to whom he told, in the utmost confidence, the good deed he had done and all the rest. And the fact of the matter is that two hours later, Griso was able to rush back to the palace and report to Don Rodrigo that Lucia and her mother had taken shelter at a convent in Monza, and that Renzo had continued on to Milan.

Don Rodrigo felt a malicious joy at their separation, and a rekindling of the malicious hope that he would achieve his goal. He was awake most of the night plotting how he could succeed, and woke

up early with two plans: one polished, the other still rough. The first was to send Griso to Monza at once, for more concrete news about Lucia, and to find out whether anything could be attempted. So he immediately summoned his faithful servant, placed four scudi in his palm, praised again the skill by which he had earned his reward, and gave him the premeditated order.

"My lord," replied Griso, hemming and hawing.

"What? Wasn't I clear?"

"If you could send someone else . . ."

"What?"

"Your Lordship, I am ready to risk my neck for my master. It is my duty. But I also know that you do not want to unduly risk the lives of your subjects."

"And?"

"Your Lordship knows of the bounty on my head, and . . . Here I am under your protection. We're a brigade. The Mayor is a friend of the family. The police respect me, and I respect them . . . it does me no honor, but anything for the sake of a peaceful life . . . I treat them like friends. In Milan your livery is known. But in Monza . . . I'm the one that's known. And does your Lordship realize that anyone who managed to hand me over to the law, or present my head, would strike it rich? And I'm not just saying this. One hundred scudi, dead or alive, and the right to free two bandits!"

"What the devil!" cried Don Rodrigo. "Now you're acting like a straw dog. You're only brave enough to nip at the legs of passersby, always turning your head to make sure you're backed up by the other dogs in the house, and afraid to wander too far from the door!"

"I believe, master, that I've proved . . ."

"So?"

"So," Griso continued frankly, his back against the wall, "let's pretend I didn't say anything: Brave as a lion, swift as a hare, and I'm ready to go."

"I didn't say you should go alone. Take two of your best men along with you . . . Scarface and Straight Shooter. Pull yourself together and act like the Griso I know. What the hell? Three men like

you, minding their own business—who do you think would stop them at the gates? The Monza police would have to be tired of living if they were ready to lay everything on the line for one hundred scudi. And then, and then, I don't think I'm so unknown in those parts that the quality of my servant counts for nothing."

Having thus shamed Griso, he gave him more complete and detailed instructions. Griso took his two partners and left, putting on a happy and brazen face, while in his heart he cursed Monza and bounties on heads and women and the whims of masters. He walked like a famished wolf, its stomach hollow, its ribs sticking out, coming down from mountains where there is nothing but snow, advancing warily across the plain, and stopping every so often, one paw raised, and wagging its mangy tail:

"Lifting its muzzle to sniff the treacherous air."*

Whenever it catches a scent of man or steel, it pricks its sharp ears and surveys the land with two bloodshot eyes, gleaming with lust for the prey and terror of the hunt.

(For anyone interested in knowing its origin, by the way, that lovely verse is taken from a tangled tale, unpublished, of crusades and Lombards, which will soon no longer be unpublished and is bound to make quite an impression. I have used it since it fits my purpose, and I mention where I found it so as not to take credit for another's work. I wouldn't want anyone to think this is my sly way of indicating that the author of that tale and I are like brothers, and that I riffle through his manuscripts at my leisure.)

The other thing nagging at Don Rodrigo was how to keep Renzo from returning to Lucia and ever setting foot in Pescarenico again. To this end, he plotted to spread rumors of threats and hidden dangers such that, when Renzo came to hear of them through a friend, as is usually the case, he would be discouraged from ever returning to these parts. But the safest thing, he thought, would be if he could

* This verse, "*Leva il muso, adorando il vento infido,*" is from canto 10 of the epic poem *I lombardi alla prima crociata* by Tommaso Grossi (1790–1853), which became the basis for the eponymous opera by Giuseppe Verdi.

get him officially banished from the state. To succeed in this, he saw that he would need the courts, rather than simply brute force. One way would be to embellish the attempt made at the priest's house and depict it as an act of aggression and sedition, and through the intercession of Professor Argle-Bargle, suggest to the Mayor that perhaps a warrant should be issued for Renzo's arrest. He realized, however, that he'd better not stir up that hornet's nest. Before wracking his brains any further, he decided to confide in Argle-Bargle just enough to make him understand his wishes. "There are so many decrees!" he thought. "And the lawyer is no fool. I'm sure he can find one that suits this case, some hair to split for that redneck, or his name's not Argle-Bargle!" But (as sometimes happens in this world) while he was thinking that the lawyer was the best man to help him in this matter, another man, a man whom no one would have imagined—Renzo himself, to be precise—was working wholeheartedly to serve the nobleman's purposes more surely and swiftly than anything the lawyer could have dreamed up.

I myself have often observed a dear impish little boy, a little too impish, to be honest, but showing signs of wanting to become a fine man. I have often observed him, as I was saying, toward evening, attempting to round up his herd of guinea pigs, which he allows to run free in the yard all day. He tries to get them to go into their pen together, but it's always in vain. One heads right, and while the little shepherd runs to corral him back, one, two, or three others escape to the left, and in every direction. Eventually, after losing his patience, he adapts to their game, and pushes the ones closest to the gate inside, and then collects the others, in ones, twos, or threes, as best he can.

We should play a similar game with our characters: Having found shelter for Lucia, we raced to Don Rodrigo; and now we have to abandon him to chase after Renzo, of whom we had lost sight.

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After the painful separation that I have described, you can easily imagine Renzo's state of mind as he walked from Monza to Milan: leaving his home, abandoning his trade, and worst of all, being sep-

arated from Lucia, and finding himself on a road without knowing where he would end up. All because of that scoundrel! When he dwelled on one or the other of these matters, he was filled with rage and the desire for revenge. But then he would remember the prayer that he, too, had said with the good friar in the church of Pescarenico. And he would vow to mend his ways. Then his anger would start to rise again, but every time he saw a roadside shrine, he would remove his hat and stop for a moment to pray. Indeed on that journey in his heart he must have killed Don Rodrigo and resuscitated him at least twenty times.

Back then the road was surrounded by two tall muddy, rocky banks, and furrowed by deep grooves that turned into gutters after a rainstorm. In deeper parts it became so flooded that you could cross them in a boat. At those spots, a short steep pathway up some steps on the embankment indicated that other travelers had cut through the fields. Climbing up one of those paths to higher ground, Renzo saw the great monument of the Milan cathedral, the Duomo, rising from across the plain, as if it stood not in the middle of a city but of a desert. And he stopped for a moment, forgetting all his troubles to contemplate from afar that eighth wonder of the world, which he had heard so much about ever since childhood.

After a while, he turned around, and his eyes were drawn to the jagged crest of mountains on the horizon: standing out distinct from and high above the others was his Resegone. He felt his blood stirring, and he stood there gazing sadly in that direction, and then sadly turned around and continued on his way. Little by little he began to make out campanili and towers and domes and roofs. Then he returned to the road and walked for a while longer. When he realized he was close to the city, he approached a passerby and, bowing with all the courtesy he knew, asked, "Beg your pardon, sir?"

"How might I help you, young man?"

"Could you tell me the shortest way to get to the Capuchin monastery, where Padre Bonaventura is?"

The man that Renzo addressed was a well-to-do resident of the

region who had been to Milan on business that day, and was on his way back without having accomplished what he had set out to do. He was in a hurry and couldn't wait to get home, and would gladly have avoided being stopped. Nevertheless, without showing any sign of impatience, he responded very courteously: "My dear son, there is more than one monastery. You'll have to tell me more clearly the name of the one you're looking for."

Renzo removed Fra Cristoforo's letter from under his shirt and showed it to the gentleman. When the man saw the words, *Porta Orientale,* he handed it back to Renzo saying, "You are in luck, young man. The monastery you are looking for is not far from here. Take this path on the left. It's a shortcut. In a few minutes you'll come to the corner of a long, low building. That's the lazaretto. Go around the ditch that surrounds it and you'll be at Porta Orientale. Pass through and in a couple hundred yards you'll see a small piazza with big elm trees. The monastery is right there. You can't miss it. Godspeed, young man." And punctuating his last words with a gracious hand gesture, he continued on his way.

Renzo was amazed and enlighted by the courtesy of the citizens to people from the country. He didn't realize that it was no ordinary day, for it was a day when the aristocrats yielded to the common folk. He followed the path that had been pointed out to him and arrived at Porta Orientale.

At the sound of this name, readers should avoid letting their imaginations run wild with the way this city gate looks today. At the time that Renzo entered the city through there, the outer road ran straight only for the length of the lazaretto, after which it became narrow and twisting, passing between two hedges. The gate itself consisted of two pillars topped by a roof to shield the doors. On one side was a gatehouse for the customs officers. The ramparts descended in an uneven slope and the ground was rough and littered with rubbish and pottery shards that had been dumped everywhere. The road that opened before those who entered through Porta Orientale could easily be compared to the entrance to Porta Tosa today.

A ditch ran down the middle of it almost right up to the gate, dividing the road into two winding lanes paved with dust or mud, depending on the season. At the point where the Borghetto alleyway used to be located and still is today, the ditch disappeared into a sewer. In that spot there used to be a column with a cross on top known as the San Dionigi Column. To the right and left were gardens bordered by hedges. At intervals there were cottages inhabited, for the most part, by washerwomen.

Renzo went in and passed through the gate. None of the customs officers paid him any mind. He found this strange since, according to the few people from his village who could boast of having been to Milan, he had heard awful stories about country folk being subjected to searches and questions upon arrival. The road was so deserted that, if he hadn't heard a buzzing in the distance that indicated great movement, he would have felt as if he were entering a ghost town. Continuing on, without knowing what to think, he noticed powdery white stripes, like snow, on the ground. But it couldn't be snow, which doesn't come down in stripes, nor does it usually appear in that season. He bent down over one of them, stared at it, touched it, and discovered that it was flour. "What abundance there must be in Milan," he said to himself, "if they squander God's grace like this. And they'd have us believe the famine is everywhere. So this is how they keep the poor country folk quiet." After a few more yards he came to the side of the column and saw something even stranger at its base. On the steps of the pedestal things were scattered here and there that were certainly not cobblestones. If he'd seen them on a baker's counter, he wouldn't have hesitated for a second to call them bread loaves.

Renzo did not dare believe his eyes, since this was no place for bread, for goodness' sake. "Let's see what's going on here," he said to himself. He walked toward the column, stooped down, and picked one up. It was indeed a round loaf of bread, pure white, of the type that Renzo was used to eating only on feast days. "It really is bread," he said aloud in amazement. "Is this how they grow it, in

a place like this, at a time like this? In a year like this? And they don't even bother picking it up when it falls? What is this, the land of plenty?"

After ten miles of walking in the fresh morning air, that bread, together with his amazement, reawakened his appetite. "Should I take it?" he asked himself. "Well, they left it here for the dogs to help themselves. No reason a Christian shouldn't enjoy it. Anyway, if the owner appears, I'll pay him for it." With these thoughts, he pocketed the one in his hand, put a second in his other pocket, and began to eat a third. He continued on his way, more uncertain than ever, and anxious to get to the bottom of this strange story.

As soon as he set out again, he saw people coming toward him from the center of town. He took a close look at the first to appear. They were a man and a woman, trailed by a boy a few steps behind; all three were bearing a burden superior to their strength; and all three cut a strange figure indeed. Their clothes, or rather the rags they wore, were covered with flour, as were their faces, which were contorted and flushed. They walked doubled over not only from weight but also apparently from pain, as if they'd been beaten. The man struggled to balance on his shoulders a big sack of flour riddled with holes that leaked flour with his every stumble and wobble. The figure of the woman was even more grotesque: an immense belly that she labored to hold between her folded arms, as if it were an old two-handled kettle. Beneath her belly were two legs, staggering along, and naked from the knee down. Renzo took a closer look and realized that the large belly was the woman's skirt, which she was holding up by the hem, having filled it with as much flour as could fit, and then some, so that with almost every step another smattering blew away. With both hands the boy was holding on his head a basket piled high with bread. Since his legs were shorter than his parents', he lagged a little behind, and every time he quickened his step to reach them, the basket tipped and another loaf of bread would fall out.

"Throw another one away, why don't you, you good-for-nothing," the mother snarled at him.

"I'm not throwing them away. They fall by themselves. What am I supposed to do?" the boy replied.

"Lucky for you my hands are busy," the woman continued, waving her fists, as if she were giving a good shake to the poor lad. And with that gesture she scattered more flour than it would take to bake two of the loaves that the boy had dropped. "Keep moving," the man said, "we'll go back for them later, or someone else will. We've been scraping by for so long. Let's enjoy this moment of plenty in peace."

In the meantime other people were arriving through the gates. One of them approached the woman and asked, "Where do you go to get bread?"

"Straight ahead," she replied. The minute they left she added, grumbling, "These thieving peasants are going to clean out all the bakery shops and all the warehouses, and nothing'll be left for us."

"There's plenty enough to go around, you old nag," said the husband, "plenty for everyone."

From this exchange and other things that he saw and heard, it began to dawn on Renzo that the city he had entered was in revolt, and today was a day of victory, each man taking in proportion to his desire or strength, and paying with his fists. Much as I would like our poor mountain boy to provide a good example for my readers, historical truth obliges me to admit that the first thing he felt was pleasure. He had so little to celebrate in the ordinary run of things that he was inclined to approve of anything that might change things in any way. Besides, since he was not a man who rose above his times, he shared the common opinion or conviction that the frequent bread shortages were caused by the hoarders and the bakers. Therefore, he was inclined to approve of any means of wresting from their grasp the food which they, according to that opinion, had cruelly denied to the hungry population. Still, he decided to stay out of the tumult, and was glad that he was headed to see a Capuchin friar who would find him shelter and act as a father to him. Bearing this in mind, and gazing all the while at the latest wave of

victors laden with spoils, he traveled the short distance remaining to the monastery.

Where a beautiful palace, with a high loggia, stands today, there used to be (until not so many years ago) a small piazza, at the far end of which the church and the monastery of the Capuchin Friars were located, with four large elm trees in front. And I congratulate, not without envy, those of my readers who never saw things in those conditions. It means that they are very young and that they have not had time for much nonsense. Renzo went straight to the door, slipped under his shirt the half loaf of bread he had left, took out the letter and readied it in his hand, and rang the bell. A small grated window opened and the face of the friar who minded the door appeared, asking who he might be.

"A man from the countryside, bringing an urgent letter from Padre Cristoforo to Padre Bonaventura."

"Give it here," said the doorkeeper, placing a hand on the grate.

"No, no," said Renzo, "I am supposed to deliver it to him personally."

"He's not at the monastery."

"If you let me in, I'll wait for him."

"Do as I say," the friar replied, "go and wait in the church, where you can do some good. As for the monastery, at the moment, you cannot enter." With that, he closed the opening back up. Renzo stood there with the letter in hand. He took a few steps toward the entrance of the church, following the doorkeeper's advice. But then, on second thought, he decided to have another look at the turmoil being stirred up by the revolt. He crossed the square, went to the side of the road, and stopped, his arms folded over his chest. He glanced to the left, toward the center of the city, where the swarm of people was louder and more crowded, drawing him into the vortex. "Let's go see," he said to himself. He took out his half loaf of bread and, munching on it, started off in that direction. And while he is walking, let me relate as briefly as possible the reasons and the origins of the unrest.

Chapter 12

It was the second year of a bad harvest. The previous year, past surpluses had compensated for the shortage, to an extent. And the people had made it to the 1628 harvest—the moment we have reached in our story—neither sated nor starving, but quite unprepared. This eagerly awaited harvest turned out to be more meager than the year before, partly because of the more inclement weather (not only in the Milan area but throughout the surrounding countryside), and partly because of man. The ravages and waste of the war—that lovely war I mentioned earlier—were so great that, in the areas closest to the battlefields, more farmlands than usual lay fallow and abandoned by the peasants. Rather than procure bread for themselves and others through their labor, they were forced to beg for charity. I said "more than usual" because the unsustainable taxes, levied with bottomless greed and inanity, and the habitual behavior of the troops garrisoned in the towns, even during peacetime—behavior that the heartrending annals of those times compared to an invading army's—as well as other reasons that I won't mention here, had already had a dire effect on the whole state for quite some time. The particular circumstances I am describing here were like the sudden spike of a chronic illness. And no sooner had that meager harvest been stored when the provisioning of the army, and the waste that always accompanies it, left such a hole that shortages were immediately felt, and with the shortages came a rise in prices: painful, corrective, and inevitable.

Once prices reach a certain point, however, many people become convinced (or so far they always have, and if they still do

today, after so many reports written by experts, can you imagine back then!) that the shortages are not to blame. They forget that they had feared and predicted them, and suddenly imagine that there is enough wheat, and the real culprit is that not enough is being sold for consumption: assumptions that are neither in heaven nor on earth but are based in equal parts on anger and wishful thinking. The grain-hoarders, real or imagined; the landowners who did not sell everything immediately; the bakers who bought the grain: anyone, in short, who had either a little or a lot, or was reputed to have some, was blamed for the shortages or the high prices. They became the object of universal complaints and abuse by both the rich and the poor. The masses were certain that the storage vaults and granaries were full, overflowing, towering. Exaggerated figures were given for the number of bushels. Other people were sure that huge quantities of grain were being secretly dispatched to towns whose residents were probably just as sure, and just as upset, that their own grain supplies were being sent to Milan.

The magistrates were implored to adopt the measures that the masses have always, at least until today, felt were so fair, so simple, so suitable for flushing out the grain that was hidden, walled up, buried, as they believed, and would bring back the times of plenty. The magistrates did take some actions, such as setting a maximum price on certain goods, threatening penalties against those who refused to sell, and issuing other decrees along these lines. Yet no measure in the world, no matter how vigorous, has the power to lower the need for food, nor to obtain crops out of season. And they certainly had no power to extract it from non-existent surpluses. So the hard times continued and grew worse. The masses blamed this on the weakness and insufficiency of the remedies, and loudly demanded more generous and decisive steps. Unfortunately for them, they found a man after their heart.

In the absence of the Governor, Don Gonzalo Fernández de Córdoba, who was busy leading the siege on Casale Monferrato, another Spaniard, Grand Chancellor Antonio Ferrer, had stepped in to perform his duties in Milan. Ferrer saw—and who would

not?—that a fair price for bread is a very desirable thing. He thought—and this was his mistake—that all it would require was an order from him. He set the bread *meta* (as they called the tariff on foodstuffs) at a price that would have been fair if the average price for grain had been thirty-three liras a bushel, when in reality it sold for as much as eighty. He acted like an aging woman who thinks she can be young again by simply altering her birth certificate.

Orders less inane and unfair had not been executed, on more than one occasion, since they were so unrealistic. But the masses made sure that this one was, and once their wishes had been converted to law, they ran to the bakers immediately to demand bread at the set price. And they demanded it in a resolute and threatening manner stemming from a combination of passion, force, and the law. The people, with a vague sense of something violent in the air, were constantly laying siege to the bakeries, to enjoy the days of plenty while they lasted. Did the bakers protest? They didn't dare! All day long, without pause, they moistened the flour, kneaded the dough, and baked and cooled the loaves. Toiling away, as I was saying, wearing their fingers to the bone, and losing money in the process: I'm sure you can see how much fun it must have been for them. But on the one side were the magistrates, issuing penalties; and on the other was the mob, wanting to get its way, and every time a baker hesitated, the mob would insist, protest loudly, and threaten to mete out its own brand of justice, the worst kind in the world.

There was no redemption. The bakers had to mix, bake, cool, and sell. But they needed more than orders or intimidation for them to keep up with the demand. What they needed was the capacity to do so. And if the situation had gone on for much longer, they wouldn't have been able to. They showed the magistrates that the burden imposed on them was unfair and unsustainable. They protested that they wanted to throw their baker's peels in the oven and leave. In the meantime they kept on baking, wishing and hoping that sooner or later, the Grand Chancellor would come to his senses. Antonio Ferrer, however, was what we would call nowadays a "man of character." He replied that in the past the bakers had benefited

greatly, and then some, and that they would benefit greatly, and then some, in the future, when the days of plenty returned. He added that he might consider paying them damages, but in the meantime they should carry on. Either he was truly persuaded by his beliefs, which he attributed to others, or—knowing how unrealistic his decree was—he preferred to leave to others the unpopular task of repealing it. Well, who knows what he was thinking? The fact remains that he did not budge from his decision.

Finally the Council of the Decurioni (a municipal magistracy consisting of noblemen, which continued to exist until the ninety-sixth year of the last century) sent the Governor a letter informing him of the state of things. It was Don Gonzalo's job to find a solution, and to get things running again.

Don Gonzalo, who was up to his ears in the business of war, did what I am sure the reader assumed he would do: He appointed a junta to which he delegated the authority to set a price for bread that might work, a price that would make both sides happy. The deputies met, or as they used to say in the hispanized bureaucratic jargon of the times, they "joined." And after a thousand and one payings of respects, compliments, preambles, sighs, adjournments, proposals, prevarications—everyone being forced toward a decision by a commonly felt need, knowing full well that they were playing a controversial card, but convinced that nothing else could be done—they decided to raise the price of bread. The bakers breathed a sigh of relief. The people howled with rage.

The evening before Renzo's arrival in Milan, the streets and squares were teeming with people, possessed by a single fury, and dominated by a single thought. Friends and strangers clustered into groups, spontaneously, almost accidentally, like raindrops on a hillside. Speeches were made that reinforced the persuasions and passions of the listeners as much as they did the orators. Among the many hotheads there were also cooler spirits who were quite pleased to see that the waters were getting choppy; they plotted to take advantage and make them even choppier with arguments and stories that the cunning are inclined to concoct, and the irate are

inclined to believe. They wanted to make the waters even choppier until they had caught a few fish. Thousands of men went to bed with the vague feeling that something had to be done, and that something would be done.

Before daybreak the streets were once again crowded with groups gathering at random: children, women, men, the elderly, workers, the poor. Here a muddled buzzing of many voices. There one man preaching while the others applauded. Here another man asked his neighbor the same question that had been asked of him. There a man repeating the exclamation that was echoing in his ears. All around were complaints, threats, shock, and a small number of words became the raw material for many long speeches.

All that was missing was an occasion, a spark, an instigation of some sort to transform words into action: It would come soon enough. At daybreak the delivery boys emerged from the bakeries carrying large baskets on their backs, filled with bread to deliver to the usual houses. The first appearance of one of these hapless boys was like a firecracker landing on a powder keg.

"Who says there's no bread!" shouted a hundred voices as one. "There's bread for the tyrants! They're swimming in abundance and want us to starve to death," said one man. He went up to the boy, grabbed hold of the basket, gave it a yank, and said, "Let's have a look." The boy turned red, then pale. He was trembling and wanted to say, "Let me go!" but the words died in his mouth. He let his arms go slack and tried to free them from the straps. "Drop the basket," shouted voices all around. Many hands grabbed for it at the same time, and then it was on the ground. The cloth cover was cast aside. A warm fragrance filled the air. "We're Christians, too. We need to eat, too!" said the first man. He took a round loaf of bread, held it up to show the crowd, and sunk his teeth into it. More hands on the basket, more bread in the air. In a split second, the banquet was over.

The people who were left empty-handed, irritated at the sight of the others' bounty, and encouraged by how easy the enterprise had been, herded off in search of more baskets, emptying as many as

they came across. There was no need to assault the delivery boys. At the sight of the marauders, the boys unlucky enough to be out and about were only too happy to set down their baskets and high-tail it out of there. Still, there were very many empty mouths, the conquerors wanted more, and mixing into both groups were instigators who were plotting an even more flagrant disorder. "To the bakeries, to the bakeries!" came the cry.

On the street called the Corsia de' Servi, there used to be, and still is, a bakery whose name has remained the same. In the Tuscan dialect, its name would be *Il Forno delle Grucce* (the Crutches Bakery), but in Milanese, it consists of words that are so bizarre, so hard to pronounce, and so barbaric, that the Italian alphabet can barely approximate the sound: *El prestin di scanse.* The crowd was heading in that direction. The shopkeepers were questioning their poor delivery boy, who had come back empty-handed and, shocked and traumatized, was stuttering out the story of his sorry adventure, when the sound of a stampede arose and an outcry grew louder and closer. The forerunners of the mob appeared.

Lock the doors, lock the windows. Hurry, hurry! One man in the shop runs to ask for help from the police commissioner. The others quickly close the doors and board up the windows. The crowd starts to gather outside, shouting, "Bread! Bread! Open up! Open up!"

A few minutes later, the police commissioner arrives with an escort of soldiers armed with halberds.* "Make way, make way, people: Go home, go home. Make way for the police commissioner," he and the soldiers call out. The crowd, which is still sparse, makes room for the officers of the law to come forward and station themselves, in a disorderly cluster, in front of the shop entrance.

"My children," the chief preached from the doorway, "what are you doing here? Go home. What has happened to your fear of God?

* The police commissioner, or "Capitano di Giustizia," was the criminal judge appointed by the monarch every two years for civil jurisdiction over cases involving senators and high state officials. He was also responsible for control of brigandage.

What would the Lord our Savior say? We don't want to hurt you, so go home. Be good! What the devil are you doing here, all riled up? Whatever it is, it's no good for the body or the soul. Go home, go home!"

But even if the people who saw the speaker's face and heard his words had been inclined to obey, there was no way they could, since they were being pushed and shoved by the people behind them, who were being pushed in turn by those behind them, in wave after wave, all the way to the outer circle of the mob, which was growing by the minute. The police commissioner felt as if he were suffocating. "Make them back up so I can breathe," he ordered the soldiers, "but don't hurt a soul. And then let's try to enter the shop: Beat them back; use your fists if you must!"

"Get back! Get back!" cry the soldiers, charging the front line and driving it back with the poles of their halberds. The people shout and retreat as best they can, shoving their backs into chests, elbows into stomachs, heels onto toes of the people behind them. Between the pushes and the shoves, the people caught in the middle would have paid anything to be somewhere else. In the meantime a small empty space had been carved out in front of the door. The police commissioner knocked once, twice, demanded that the shop open up. The workers inside looked out from upstairs, ran down, and opened the door. The chief rushed in and called the soldiers, who squeezed their way in, one by one, the last men holding back the crowd with their halberds. Once they were all inside, they bolted the door and boarded it up. The police commissioner raced upstairs and looked out a window: What a mob!

"People!" he shouted. The crowd looked up. "People, go home. I'll grant a general pardon to all who go home."

"We want bread! We want bread! Open up! Open up!" were the only words that could be discerned in the crowd's terrifying reply.

"Use your heads, my children! Be careful. It's not too late! Come now, go home. You'll get your bread, but this is not the right way. Hey . . . hey! What are you doing down there? Hey! You at the door! Eh no! I can see you: Use your head! Be careful! That's a crime, you

know. You'll have me to answer to! Hey! What are you doing with those iron rods? Put them down! Shame on you! The people of Milan are known the world over for their goodness! Listen to me, listen: You have always been good chil— You dirty dogs!"

His sudden change of speech was provoked by a rock, launched from the hands of one of his "good children," that struck the chief in the forehead, on the left protrusion of the metaphysical cavity. "You dirty dogs!" he continued to shout, quickly shutting the window and taking cover. But no matter how loud he hollered, his words, both good and bad, were scattered and defeated in midair by the storm of protests that rose from below. What he later reported seeing was a great battering of stones and iron (anything people could lay their hands on) against the door to break it down, and against the windows to tear out the gratings. The operation was already well underway.

In the meantime from the upstairs windows, the shop masters and apprentices cursed and shouted at the people below to stop. They held up stones and threatened to start throwing them. When that didn't work, they really did start to throw them, and not a single one missed its mark. The crowd was so tightly packed that, as the saying goes, not even a millet seed would land on the ground.

"You scoundrels! You villains! So this is the bread you give to the poor? Uh! Ow! Wait! Ouch!" they shouted from below. A few people were injured, two boys were killed, and the mob's fury rose to a peak. The door was broken down, the grating torn out, and the crowd flooded through every gap. Seeing things take a turn for the worse, the people inside fled to the attic. The police commissioner, the soldiers, and some of the shop boys stayed behind, huddled in the corners. Others, escaping through the garret, took to the rooftops like cats.

At the sight of the spoils, the conquering army dropped all plans for a gory revenge. They raided the pantries and looted the bread. Some people raced to the cash drawer, broke the lock, took the tills, grabbed coins by the fistful, stuffed them in their pockets, and left the bakery weighted down with money, only to come back to steal

any bread that was left. Then the crowd dispersed to the storerooms. People grabbed hold of sacks of flour, dragged them out and turned them upside down. Some men stuck a sack between their legs, loosened the opening, and to reduce the load to a manageable amount, tossed out some of the contents. Others shouted, "Wait, wait!" stooped down while holding out an apron, a handkerchief, or a hat to receive the divine grace. One man ran to the kneading trough and grabbed a lump of dough that stretched and slipped every which way. Another, who had conquered a sieve, carried it through the air. There was a coming and going of men, women, children, with pushes and shoves and shouts, and the white powder settling everywhere, flying everywhere, coating and clouding everything. Outside two processions moved in opposite directions, crossing and crashing into each other, one coming out with its loot, the other going in to plunder its own.

While the bakery was being torn apart, none of the other shops in the city were safe. But the people did not go rushing to them in large enough numbers to stage an attack. At some the masters had gathered auxiliaries and were ready to defend themselves. At others, finding their numbers too small, the masters came to a kind of détente: They distributed bread to those who had started to gather in front of the shops, in order to make them go away. And the looters left, not because they were satisfied but because the halberdiers and the police officers—who had kept their distance from the conflagration at the Crutches Bakery—made their presence felt elsewhere in sufficient force to scare away the stragglers who couldn't muster a crowd. And so the turmoil continued to escalate at the first hapless bakery; everyone who was itching for trouble raced there, where their friends had the upper hand, and their immunity was guaranteed.

It was at this moment that Renzo, with no bread left to munch on, was walking through the Porta Orientale neighborhood, unaware that he was heading to the heart of the unrest. He moved quickly, except when held back by the crowd. As he made his way, he looked around and listened carefully, to see if he could extract

from the hubbub of voices more definite news about the situation. Here, more or less, are the words he was able to discern:

"Now the shameless lies of those crooks are out in the open. And they said there was no bread or flour or wheat!" shouted one man. "No more pretending. Now it's clear as day. Long live the days of plenty!"

"This is all a waste of time!" said another. "A drop in the bucket! Things are only going to get worse until true justice is done. Prices on bread will go down, but they'll put poison in it to make us poor die like flies. They're already saying there's too many of us. That's what the junta said, and I know it for a fact. I heard it with my own two ears, from a neighbor of mine who's friends with a relative of one of their scullery boys."

Words I can't repeat were uttered by a man who was foaming at the mouth, holding a ragged handkerchief over his tousled, bloodied hair. Some passersby echoed his sentiments, as if to console him.

"Make way, make way if you please, gentlemen. Let a poor father of five get through so he can bring some food to his poor family," said a man who was staggering along with a huge sack of flour. Everyone did their best to step back and let him pass.

"You want to know what I think?" whispered another to his companion. "I don't give a damn. I'm a man of the world, and I know how these things end up. The same half-wits who are making such a stink today will be at home quaking with fear tomorrow or the next day. I've already seen a few faces, certain gentlemen making the rounds, snooping about, taking note of who's here and who isn't. When this is all over, like it or not, someone's going to have to pay the price."

"The bakers are protected," a boisterous voice shouted, "by the Commissioner of Provision."*

"They're all crooks!" said another man nearby.

* The Vicario di Provvisione, or Commissioner of Provision, according to Stefano D'Amico, represented the head of the civic administration of Milan and the judge in all fiscal and police matters: He administered the budget, appointed all city employees, and controlled provisions. The character is based on the historic figure of Lodovico Melzi d'Eril.

"Yes, but Antonio Ferrer is the biggest crook of them all," the first man retorted.

The Governor had selected the Commissioner of Provision from among six noblemen nominated by the Council of Decurioni. The Commissioner served as chairman of the Council and of the Tribunal of Provision, consisting of twelve men, who were also aristocrats. Its various duties included the rationing of food. Whoever held this position was, in times of famine and ignorance, inevitably blamed for shortages: unless he behaved like Ferrer, whose ideas he shared, but not his authority.

"Scoundrels!" exclaimed another. "How much worse can it get? The mob even called the Grand Chancellor a senile old fool, just to discredit him and take over the government themselves. We should build a big cage, put them inside, and make them live on pigfeed and weeds, the way they wanted to treat us."

"Bread?" said one man who was trying to slip away quickly. "It was more like stones, tons of them, and they came raining down like hail, crushing my ribs! I can't wait to get home."

Amid all this talk, which he was either familiar with or shocked by (I don't know which), and jostled this way and that, Renzo finally arrived in front of the bakery. The crowd had already thinned, so he was able to contemplate the fresh and brutal destruction: the walls battered and pockmarked by stones and bricks, the windows torn off their frames, the door bashed in.

"This isn't right," said Renzo to himself, "if they destroy all the bakeries, where do they expect to bake bread? In the wells?"

Here and there someone would walk out of the bakery with a drawer, a cupboard, or a thresher, a rolling pin, a bench, a bread basket, a ledger: anything, in other words, that belonged to that poor bakery. Shouting, "Make way, make way," they would pass through the crowd. Everyone was walking in the same direction, toward a clearly agreed-on place. "What is happening here?" Renzo wondered. He followed a man who had tied together a bundle of broken boards and splinters, hoisted it on his back, and was heading, like the others, down the street along the north side of the

Duomo, which was named after the staircase that used to be there until a few years ago.

Renzo's wish to see what was happening could not keep him from stopping to gaze up at the grand monument, mouth open, when he found himself in front of the cathedral. He then started to walk more briskly to get back on the trail of the man he had selected as his guide. He turned the corner, took a look at the façade of the Duomo—which was still rough-hewn, for the most part, and far from complete—and continued to follow the man, who was headed toward the middle of the piazza. With each step, the crowd grew more compact, but it opened up for the wood-bearer. He parted the waves of the people and Renzo, close behind, reached the center of the crowd. There in the middle was an empty space with a pile of embers as well as the vestiges of the tools and equipment looted from the bakery. All around there was a great clapping of hands and stamping of feet, the roar of a thousand cries of triumph and a thousand curses.

The man threw his bundle on the pile. Another man was trying to get the fire going again with one end of a charred pole. The smoke billowed and grew thicker. The fire started up and the shouts grew louder. "Long live the days of plenty! Down with the hoarders! Down with the famine! Death to the Tribunal of Provision! Death to the junta! Long live bread!"

The destruction of the thresher and kneading troughs, the devastation of the bakeries, and the harassment of the bakers, are hardly the most efficient ways to bring back bread, but this is a philosophical subtlety that escapes the comprehension of the masses. Without being a great philosopher, however, an individual will sometimes grasp this truth instinctively the first time the question presents itself. But after voicing his own opinion and hearing the opinions of others, he loses that ability. Renzo, in fact, was quick to realize how counterproductive the destruction was, as we have seen, and he kept returning to the thought. He kept his thoughts to himself, however, because none of the many faces surrounding him seemed willing to say: "Brother, if I am wrong, correct me, and I will be eternally grateful."

The fire had died down again. No one else arrived with more wood, and the people started to get bored. Then the rumor started that at Cordusio (a nearby piazza), another bakery was under siege. In circumstances such as these, it is often the announcement itself that makes something happen. As the rumor spread, the mob was filled with the desire to rush over there. "I'm going, are you? Come on, let's go!" could be heard all around. The crowd split up and turned into a march. Renzo lingered in place, almost motionless, until he was dragged along by the force of the mob. He debated whether he should leave the uprising and return to the monastery and Padre Bonaventura, or continue on to witness this second assault. Once again his curiosity prevailed. Still he resolved not to throw himself into the mix and get his bones bruised or worse, but rather to keep a distance and observe. Finding himself already off to the side, he took the second loaf of bread from his pocket and, biting into it, headed for the rear of the tumultuous army.

From the square, the crowd had already entered the short and narrow street of Pescheria Vecchia, and from there, through the slanted archway, to the Piazza de' Mercanti. When passing by the loggia of the building formerly known as the Collegio dei Dottori, there was hardly anyone who did not glance at a statue in a niche. There, prominent, was the stern, forbidding, scowling face—I could say more—of King Philip II, who, even in marble, commanded a kind of respect, and with his outstretched arm, seemed to be saying, "You'll have to answer to me, you rabble."

By a unique set of circumstances, the statue is no longer there. Almost one hundred and seventy years after the events I am relating, one day the head was altered, and the scepter removed from its hand and replaced with a dagger. The statue was renamed Marcus Brutus.* It would remain in this configuration for a couple of years until one morning, some individuals who had no particular liking

* Marcus Brutus (85–42 B.C.E.) was the Roman senator who took part in the assassination of Julius Caesar, and therefore symbolic not only of betrayal, but also of the republican, anti-monarchical spirit that motivated the killing of the Emperor.

for Marcus Brutus, and indeed must have held a secret grudge against him, threw a rope around the statue, pulled it down, and abused it every possible way. They then dragged it through the streets, mutilated it, and reduced it to a shapeless torso. Finally, completely exhausted, their eyes popping out and their tongues hanging, they rolled it off to God knows where. If the artist, Andrea Biffi, had only known its fate when he was carving it!

From Piazza de' Mercanti, the mob squeezed into Via de' Fustagnai, through the other archway, and from there flooded into the Cordusio. As each person emerged, they immediately looked in the direction of the bakery that had been mentioned. Rather than the multitude of friends they expected to find in action, however, they saw only a few, standing back, as if hesitating, at some distance from the shop, which was closed. The windows were manned by armed individuals, ready to defend themselves. At the sight some marveled, some swore, some laughed. Some turned around to tell the others who were arriving in a steady stream. Some stopped, some wanted to turn back, some said, "Onward, onward!" There was a pushing forward and a holding back, a kind of lull, an indecision, a confused buzzing of disagreements and consultations. In the midst of all this, a cursed voice exploded from the crowd, "Near here is the house of the Commissioner of Provision. Let's take justice into our own hands and ransack it!" This shout rang out more like a common decision than a fresh proposal. "To the Commissioner's! To the Commissioner's!" became the only cry that could be heard. The crowd surged forward in unison to the street where you find the house that had just been mentioned at this evil hour.

Chapter 13

At that moment, the hapless Commissioner, lacking both an appetite and fresh bread, was struggling through a bitter repast. He waited anxiously to see how the storm would end, never suspecting that it was about to land with a shock on his doorstep. An honest man had raced ahead of the crowd to warn him of the impending danger. The servants, drawn by the noise outside the door, looked down the street with alarm. Even as they listened to the man's warning, they could see the vanguard appear, and rushed to inform their master. While he fretted over whether or how to flee, another man arrived to announce that it was too late. The servants had barely enough time to close the door. They bolted it shut, boarded it up, and ran to shutter the windows, as if the sky were turning black and a hailstorm was expected any minute. The rising din of the crowd rumbled like thunder, echoing in the empty courtyard. Every rafter in the house shook, and in the midst of the vast and muddled clamor, a shower of rocks could be heard pelting the door.

"We want the Commissioner! He's a tyrant! A hoarder! Hand him over, dead or alive!"

The poor wretch paced from room to room, pale and out of breath, slapping his hands together, beseeching God—and his servants—to hold strong and find him a way to escape. But how? Where? He went upstairs to the attic. Through a peephole he looked down at the street apprehensively and saw that it was teeming with an angry mob. He could hear the voices calling for his death. More terrified than ever, he withdrew and went looking for the safest, most secluded hiding place. Huddled in a corner, he listened very,

very carefully to see if the menacing noise had faded, and if the turmoil was subsiding. Instead he heard the roar of the crowd grow even louder and more savage, and the beating on the door double in intensity. Gripped by this new assault on his heart, he quickly plugged his ears. Then, like a mad man, gritting his teeth and furrowing his brow, he extended his arms and pointed his fists, as if that would keep the door shut . . . Well, what exactly he did no one knows, since he was alone, and history can only guess. A practice, luckily, to which history is accustomed.

This time Renzo found himself in the thick of the turmoil, not carried by the crowd but having placed himself there deliberately. At the first mention of blood he could feel his own blood boil. As for looting, he could not tell in this case whether it was a good or a bad idea. But the idea of killing filled him with a clear and immediate horror. He may have been persuaded—due to the fatal complaisance of passionate spirits before the passionate assertions of the multitude—that the Commissioner was the main reason for the famine and an enemy of the poor, but he had still resolved to join in the effort to save him from being killed, having overheard just such a threat at the first stirring of the crowd. It was with this in mind that he had plunged in, almost making it to the door, on which people were laying siege in a hundred different ways. Some were trying to break the nails on the lock with cobblestones. Others, armed with bars, chisels, and hammers, tried to work in a more conventional manner. Still others, having no better tools, wielded stones, blunt knives, nails, clubs, and even their fingernails to deface and destroy the walls of the house, intent on tearing out bricks to make a breach. Those who couldn't reach the house shouted words of encouragement. But their pushing and shoving complicated an enterprise that was already complicated by the disorderly rivalry among the men trying to break into the house. Thank heavens, since the same thing that happens all too often in the service of good also happens in the service of evil: The most ardent advocates become an impediment to their own goals.

The first magistrates to get the news of what was happening im-

mediately sent a request for help to the castellan (which at the time was called the Porta Giovia Castle), who dispatched a few soldiers. But between the news, the order, the mobilization, the preparations to march, and the march itself, the house was already under siege from every side by the time they arrived. The soldiers came to a halt on the far edge of the crowd. The commanding officer could not figure out what to do. The crowd was nothing more—if you don't mind my saying—than a riffraff of people of different ages and sexes, gawking. At the order to disperse and make way, they responded with a long, sullen grumble. No one budged. To fire above the crowd seemed, to the officer, not only cruel but also dangerous. Injuring the least threatening risked inflaming the most violent. Not to mention that he had been given no such instruction. The best line of action was to open up the outer circle, pushing the crowd to the right and left, and advance, bringing battle to those who were waging it. But how? Who knew whether the soldiers would manage to advance in a compact and orderly fashion or, rather than split the crowd, disappear into it and, having provoked it, be at its mercy. The indecision of the commander and inaction of the soldiers gave the appearance, rightly or wrongly, of fear. The people closest to them were happy to stare them in the face with an attitude that said, "I dare you." The people farther away did not abstain from openly jeering and making faces. Still farther away, few knew or cared that the soldiers were even there. The vandals continued tearing at the walls, with no other thought than to succeed quickly in their enterprise, while the spectators egged them on with their cries.

Standing out in the crowd was a man who was himself a spectacle, an old jailbird, his bloodshot eyes bulging from their sockets, his wrinkles contracted into a sneer of diabolical glee. In the air above his vindictive white head, his hands were shaking a hammer, a rope, and four long spikes with which he said he would nail the Commissioner's body to the door, dead or alive.

"What! Shame on you!" escaped from the mouth of Renzo, appalled by the old man's words and the sight of so many approving

faces, but heartened to see others who, despite their silence, emanated his same feeling of horror. "For shame! Do we want to rob the executioner of his job? Murder a fellow Christian? How can we expect God to give us bread if we commit such an atrocity? He won't send bread: He'll strike us down with lightning!"

"Dog! Traitor!" shouted a man who overheard Renzo's kind words in the midst of the commotion. Turning toward Renzo with a demonic face, he cried, "Look, everyone! Here's a lackey of the Commissioner, disguised as a peasant! A spy! After him! After him!" A hundred voices called out from every side, "What? Where? Who? The Commissioner's lackey. A spy. The Commissioner's disguised as a peasant, and he's escaping. Where is he? After him! After him!"

Renzo shut up and shrank into his skin, wanting to disappear. Some of his neighbors tried to hide him, making various loud shouts to confound the murderous voices. But what helped him most were cries of "Make way! Make way!" that emerged from nearby. "Make way! Help is here! Make way!"

What was it? A long ladder that some were bringing to prop against the house and climb in through a window. Fortunately, this device—which would have made the invasion easy—was not very easy to maneuver. The men who were carrying it—on both ends and on each side—were being crushed, harassed, and torn apart by the crowd, and were forced to move in waves. One bellowing man was weighted down as if he were under a shaking yoke, his head stuck between two rungs and the rails on his shoulders. Another was shoved away from his burden, causing the abandoned ladder to bang into shoulders, arms, and ribs: Can you imagine how the people who were struck responded? But others picked up the dead weight, diving underneath and placing it on their shoulders, with the shout, "Come on, men! Let's go!" The fatal machine advanced in starts, zigzagging its way through the crowd. It arrived just in time to distract and scatter Renzo's adversaries. He took advantage of the confusion within the confusion and slipped away unnoticed, crouching low and then elbowing his way forward when that failed, intent

on getting away from this unsavory place as soon as possible in order to see or wait for Padre Bonaventura.

Suddenly an extraordinary wave rolls over the crowd, and a rumor passes from mouth to mouth: "Ferrer! Ferrer!" Surprise, joy, rage, sympathy, or revulsion bursts out everywhere reached by that name. Some shout it, some want to stifle it, some proclaim it, some reject it, some bless it, some curse it.

"Ferrer is here!" "No, he's not!" "But he is! He is! Long live Ferrer! The man who brought down the price of bread!" "He is not!" "He is, too! He's here! He's here! In a carriage!" "Who cares! What's he got to do with anything? We don't want him!" "Ferrer! Long live Ferrer! Friend to the poor! He's coming to toss the Commissioner in jail!" "No, no, we want our own justice! Get back! Get back!" "Yes! It's Ferrer! Let Ferrer through! Off to prison with the Commissioner!"

Everyone stands on tiptoe and looks toward the place where the unexpected arrival was announced. And since everyone was standing, people could see neither more nor less than if their feet were flat on the ground, but they all stood anyway.

At the far edge of the crowd, across from where the soldiers were posted, Antonio Ferrer, the Grand Chancellor, had in fact arrived in a carriage. Troubled, in all likelihood, by the awareness that his blunders and obstinacy had been the cause or at least the occasion for the uprising, he was now coming to placate and prevent the most dreadful and irreparable effects, willing to spend a popularity that had been won through wrongful means.

In popular uprisings, there are always people who—in the heat of passion or by fanatical persuasion, sinister intentions, or an inclination for troublemaking—do everything they can to make matters worse. They propose or promote the most ruthless ideas, and blow on the fire whenever it starts to die down. Nothing is enough for them: They'd like to see the riots go on forever, uncontained. To compensate, there are always other people who, with equal ardor and equal determination, strive for the opposite effect, either moti-

vated by friendship or affection for the persons threatened, or driven solely by a pious and spontaneous horror at bloodshed and atrocities. Heaven bless them. Within each of these two opposing parties, even when there is no prior agreement, their singularity of purpose forges an immediate consensus once they take action. Those who form the mass and almost the material of the uprising are an accidental mix of people who tend toward one extreme or the other, by more or less indefinite gradations: a little excited, a little cunning, a little inclined toward a certain form of justice (in their understanding of the word), and a little eager to see something horrible happen. They're primed for cruelty or mercy, to detest or adore, if and when the occasion arises to fully feel one way or the other. They're always eager to know, to believe in that greater cause, since they need to either hail and applaud someone or to deride them. "Dead or alive" are the words that spring most readily to their lips. The instigators who persuade the mob that a certain person doesn't deserve to be drawn and quartered can just as easily convince it that the same person should be borne in triumph. They can be activists, spectators, tools, or obstacles, depending on how the wind blows. They're even ready to shut up, when there are no more slogans to repeat; to stop, when there are no more instigators; to disband, when many concordant and uncontested voices say, "Let's go"; and to return home, asking one another, "What was that all about?" But since this mass can lend its greater numbers to whomever it chooses, each of the two active parties tries to outdo the other to attract and harness the mob, like two rival spirits fighting to enter that swollen body and dictate its movements. They set their sights on whoever is best at spreading the rumors most apt to excite passions, to steer movements toward one purpose or the other; whoever is best at finding the piece of information that will arouse indignation or dampen it, that will rekindle hopes or fears; whoever can find the slogans that, when repeated by the many and the strong, simultaneously express, attest to, and create the vote of the majority, for one side or the other.

The point of this digression is that, in the struggle between two

contenders for the vote of the crowd assembled in front of the Commissioner's house, the appearance of Antonio Ferrer lent almost immediate advantage to the humane, who had been in the minority, and who, if he had arrived any later, would have had neither the power nor the motivation to resist. The masses loved him because of the favorable rate on bread he had offered to consumers, and for his heroic rejection of every opposing argument. Those who were already so inclined were now even more enamored of the spirited, confident old man who, without guards, without apparatus, had come to face an irate mob. Then, when they heard that he had come to take the Commissioner to prison, the news had a wondrous effect on them. The fury of the crowd, which would have grown worse, making no concessions, if the Commissioner had been taken violently, was now retreating within the majority, thanks to the bone that Ferrer had tossed them: his promise of satisfaction.

Once the partisans of peace had caught their second wind, they came to Ferrer's rescue in a hundred different ways. The ones closest to him rallied the crowd again and again in his support, trying at the same time to get it to pull back and allow the carriage to pass through. The ones farther away, applauding, repeating, and spreading his words (or the ones they thought best), turned the latest passion of the volatile assembly against the angry and obstinate, and shamed them into silence. "What man among you won't say, 'Long live Ferrer!' Don't you want bread to be cheap? Only a scoundrel wouldn't want a Christian justice: Some of the loudest would even help the Commissioner escape! Lock up the Commissioner! Long live Ferrer! Make way for Ferrer!"

As the number of people voicing these sentiments grew, the boldness of their opponents shrank in proportion, until the peacemakers shifted from preaching to fighting, grabbing hold of and pummeling those who were still trying to tear down the walls, beating them back and seizing the weapons from their grip. The original rioters shook with rage, threatening, attempting to fight back, but they had lost their bloody cause. Now the prevailing cry was, "Prison! Justice! Ferrer!" After a brief skirmish, they were pushed

back. The peacemakers took possession of the door, both to defend it against new attackers and to prepare the way for Ferrer to enter. Some of them sent word to the people inside the house (which was now riddled with cracks), that help was on its way, and they should get the Commissioner ready. "To leave immediately . . . for prison: Have we made ourselves clear?"

"Is he the same Ferrer who helps write the decrees?" Renzo asked a nearby man, remembering the "*vidit Ferrer*" that Argle-Bargle had shouted into his ear, while showing him the signature at the bottom of the page.

"That's right, the Grand Chancellor," came the reply.

"He's a decent man, right?"

"The best there is! He's the one that brought down the price of bread. The others didn't want to, and now he's come to lock up the Commissioner, who didn't do the right thing."

Needless to say, Renzo immediately took Ferrer's side. He wanted to go right up to him, which wasn't easy, but by pushing and elbowing his way through the crowd like a true son of the mountains, he was able to make it to the front row, right next to the carriage.

At that moment, the carriage was stuck in one of those jams that are inevitable and frequent on such an excursion. Old Ferrer looked out of one window and then the other with a humble face, filled with joy and affection, a face that he had always reserved for the times he found himself in the presence of King Philip IV, but was now forced to expend on this occasion. He was speaking, but the rumbling and the roar of so many voices, and the "hurrahs" rising around him, left very little for the very few to hear. So he added some gestures, placing his fingertips on his lips, then blowing a kiss that his hands, separating immediately, distributed to the right and the left, in appreciation of the benevolence of the people. One second he would reach out and slowly wave his hands from a carriage window to plead for a little space. The next he would lower them politely to request a little silence. When he obtained it, those closest to him heard and repeated his words: "Bread. Plenty for all! I

have come here to bring justice: a little space, please." Then, overcome and almost suffocated by the din of so many voices, the sight of so many faces crowded together, of so many eyes upon him, he withdrew for a moment, puffed out his cheeks, let out a long sigh, and said to himself, "*Por mi vida, que de gente!*" And they responded: "Long live Ferrer! Don't be afraid! You're our man. Bread! Bread!"

"Yes, bread! bread!" Ferrer replied. "Plenty for all, I promise," and he placed his hand over his heart.

"Make way," he added immediately, "I'm here to take the Commissioner to prison, to give him the just punishment he deserves," adding, in a whisper, "*si es culpable.*" Leaning toward the coachman, he said quickly, "*Adelante, Pedro, si puedes.*"

The coachman also smiled at the crowd with a noble indulgence, as if he, too, were a great personage. And with an ineffable grace, he swung his whip slowly but surely, to the right and to the left, to ask the nearby unfortunates to squeeze together a little and step back a little more. "Please, my good sirs," he said, adding his own voice, "make a little room, just a little. Just enough to let us through."

The most enthusiastic well-wishers jumped in to help make the room so graciously requested. Those in front of the horses got the people to pull back by saying kind words, laying their hands over their chests, and giving them a gentle and well-aimed shove. "Over there. Get a move on it. Make a little room." Others were doing the same on both sides of the carriage, so that it could pass through without its wheels crushing feet or putting a dent in someone's face, which, in addition to hurting people, would have tarnished the aura of Antonio Ferrer.

Renzo, after a few minutes of fantasizing about that dignified elder, and feeling hemmed in by the crowd, exhausted by the long day, but excited by a sense of urgency, embellished by the hope of removing a man from mortal danger . . . Renzo, I was saying, set aside all thoughts of leaving. He decided to help Ferrer and not to abandon him until he had achieved his purpose. No sooner said than done. He joined the others in opening up a path, and was certainly not among the least active. "Go on ahead," said more than

one man to the coachman while stepping back or running ahead to clear the way. "*Adelante, presto, con juicio,*" added Ferrer. And the carriage moved forward. Amid the greetings he was squandering on the masses, Ferrer uttered a special thanks, with a knowing smile, to those he saw laboring for his sake. More than one of those smiles was directed at Renzo, who really did deserve them, and who on that day was doing a better job of serving the Grand Chancellor than the best of his secretaries ever could have. And the young man, smitten by that good grace, felt almost as if he and Antonio Ferrer had become friends.

Once the carriage started to move, it pressed forward, although rather slowly, and not without stopping every few yards. The destination was no more than a gunshot away, considering the time it took to get there, the journey seemed long, even to someone who was not in such a holy hurry as Ferrer. People were moving to the front and back, to the right and left of the carriage, like waves breaking against a ship sailing through a storm. But the pandemonium was even louder, more strident and deafening than a storm. Ferrer, looking first one way and then the other, posing and gesturing at the same time, tried to discern what was being said, to match his responses to the occasion. He wanted to entertain a brief conversation with that friendly gathering, but it was hard, maybe the hardest thing he had ever had to do in his many years as Grand Chancellor. Here and there, however, a few words in Italian, or even a few sentences, were repeated by a cluster of people as he passed by, and reached his ear like a rocket going off amid the immense crackling of fireworks. And he would try to devise a satisfactory response to those calls, adding in the next moment, for good measure, the words he knew to be most acceptable, while also repeating endlessly, "Yes, good sirs, bread, enough for all. I'll conduct him to prison. He will pay for his crime . . . *si es culpable.* Yes, yes, I'll issue the order: Lower the price of bread! *Asi es* . . . so it shall be, I mean to say: His Highness the King does not want his loyal vassals to go hungry. *Ox! Ox! Guardaos:* Watch out, kind sirs, you'll get hurt. *Pedro, adelante con juicio.* Plenty for all, plenty for all. Make way, please. Bread, bread.

Off to prison, off to prison. What?" He asked this last question to a man who had stuck his head through the window to shout something, either a request or a bit of advice or praise. But the man, before he even heard that "what," was pulled back by someone who saw that he was about to be crushed beneath a wheel. Amid all this questioning and answering, both the endless praise and snatches of grumblings from the opposition were immediately muffled, Ferrer finally arrived at the Commissioner's house, thanks mainly to the actions of those good helpers.

The others, as I was saying, were already there with the same good intentions, and in the meantime were toiling to make and remake a little space. Ferrer implores, urges, threatens. He pushes, pushes harder, gaining ground here and there, with that doubling of willpower and renewal of strength that comes from seeing the coveted goal approach. He had finally managed to split the mob in two, and then to push back the two wings so there was a small empty space between the door and the carriage, which came to a halt at that spot. Renzo, part trailblazer, part bodyguard, had arrived at the same time as the carriage and was able to place himself in one of the two front rows of well-wishers, who were acting as both a phalanx to the carriage and an embankment against the two waves of people pressing in. By helping to hold back one of the waves with his powerful shoulders, he had also found a good vantage point.

Ferrer heaved a sigh of relief when he saw the little square of free space and the door still closed. By "closed" I mean, "not open," since the hinges had been almost completely torn off the doorframe. Splintered, battered, forced, and misaligned, the door itself had a big crack down the middle through which you could see, on the other side, the crooked, loose bar, barely hanging to the door, holding the door in one piece, if even that. One of the good supporters appeared at that crack, hollering at them to open up. Another man quickly opened the carriage door. Old Ferrer stuck out his head, stood up, and grasping the man's arm with his right hand, stepped down to the running board.

On both sides, the crowd stood on tiptoe to catch a glimpse: a

thousand faces, a thousand beards tilting upward. Their curiosity and attention created a momentary silence. Ferrer, from his perch on the running board, took a look around, greeted the multitude with a bow, as if he were on a pulpit, and, placing his left hand over his chest, shouted, "Bread and justice!" Confident, righteous, wrapped in his judicial toga, he set foot on the ground amid an acclamation that rose to the stars. In the meantime the people inside had opened, or rather finished opening the door, sliding back the bolt together with the brackets by which it was barely attached, and widening the crack just a little to let the awaited guest in. "Hurry, hurry," he said, "open wide enough for me to come in. And, you men, be good, hold back the crowd. Don't let them pile on top of me . . . for the love of heaven! Make a little extra room for when I leave." "Hey! Hey! Just a minute," he said to the people inside, "slow down with that bolt, let me through: Ouch! My toga! Watch out for my toga!" And the toga would indeed have gotten stuck in the door if Ferrer had not deftly pulled in the outer hem, which disappeared like the tail of a snake retreating into its lair.

Once the door was closed, it was roughly propped up again. Outside Ferrer's self-appointed bodyguards were using their shoulders, arms, and loud voices to keep the space free, praying to God in their hearts that the Grand Chancellor would be quick.

"Hurry, hurry," Ferrer said from inside, beneath the portico, to the servants who had gathered around him, panting and crying, "Bless you, Excellency. Oh, Excellency, Excellency!"

"Hurry, hurry," Ferrer repeated, "where is the blessed man?"

The Commissioner descended the stairs, half-dragged, half-carried by his other servants, looking as white as freshly washed bed linen. When he saw his savior, he let out a sigh of relief. His pulse came back. Some life returned to his legs and color to his cheeks. He rushed toward Ferrer as best he could, saying, "I am in the hands of God and of Your Excellency. But how can we escape from here? We're surrounded by people who want me dead!"

"*Venga usted conmigo.* Chin up! My carriage is right outside. Hurry, hurry!" Ferrer took him by the hand and led him to the door, reas-

suring him the whole way, while at the same time saying to himself, "*Acqui està el busilis; Dios nos valga!*"

The door opens. Ferrer goes out first. The other man follows, crouching, attached to his rescuer's toga like a child to its mother's apron strings. The men who had kept the square clear are now holding up their hands and hats, like a screen, a cloud, to shield the Commissioner from the perilous sight of the mob. He is the first to get in the carriage, and huddles in a corner. Ferrer gets in next. The door is closed. The mob struggles to see, to understand, to guess what has happened. And it unleashes a roar of applause and curses.

The last part of the trip could have been the hardest and most dangerous, but the popular vote had shifted decisively from calling for the Commissioner's death to allowing him to go to prison. While the carriage was stopped, many who had eased Ferrer's arrival set about opening and then keeping open a path through the mob, so that the return trip might go a little faster and smoother. And as the carriage advanced once again, the two groups assembled on either side fell in together and then mingled in its wake.

The minute Ferrer was seated, he leaned over to tell the Commissioner to keep his head down, for the love of heaven, but he need not have bothered. Ferrer, instead, had to show his face in order to occupy and attract the crowd's full attention. For the whole trip back, as on the trip there, he spoke to the volatile audience, long on length but short on coherence, tossing in the occasional Spanish word that he would quickly whisper in the ear of his cowering fellow passenger. "Yes, my good men, bread and justice: to the castle, to prison with him, on my watch. Thank you, thank you, *grazie tante.* No, no, he won't escape. *Por ablandarlos.* It's only right. We will investigate, we will see. And I like you, too, kind sirs. A severe punishment. *Esto lo digo por su bien.* A fair price. An honest price, and punishment to the hoarders. If you could move to the side, please. Yes, yes, I'm an honest man, a friend to the people. He will be punished: Yes, it's true, he's a crook, a scoundrel. *Perdone usted.* He's in for a hard time, he is . . . *si es culpable.* Yes, yes, we're going to fix the bakers. Long live the King, and the good people of Milan, his

faithful servants! He'll pay for this, he'll pay! *Animo, estamos ya casi fuera.*"

They had passed through most of the mob and were already close to being in the clear, when Ferrer, who had begun to give his lungs a rest, saw the Spanish soldiers riding to the rescue, arriving late to the scene. But in the end they were not completely useless, since with the support and the leadership of a few citizens, they helped keep the road open for the final escape. When the carriage passed, they stood in formation and saluted the Grand Chancellor, who once again gave a greeting to the right, a greeting to the left. And to the officer who came up to him to offer his own personal salute, he said, accompanying his words with a gesture of his right hand, "*beso a usted las manos,*" whose true meaning the officer understood. Namely, "Thanks for nothing!" In reply, he saluted again and shrugged his shoulders. This would have been the perfect moment to say, "*Cedant arma togae*"—"Let arms yield to the toga"—but erudite quotations were the last thing on Ferrer's mind.* His words would have fallen on deaf ears, anyway, since the officer did not understand Latin.

In passing between these two rows of Spanish soldiers, between those muskets raised so respectfully, Pedro the carriage driver regained his former courage. He returned to his senses, remembered who he was and whom he was driving, and shouted, "*Obe! Obe!*" dropping all pretense of formality, before a crowd that had thinned enough to be mistreated. With a crack of his whip, he made his horses race toward the castle.

"*Levantese! Levantese! Estàmos ya fuera,*" Ferrer told the Commissioner who, relieved by the dying down of the shouts, the speed of the carriage, and the words he had just heard, turned around, pulled himself together, and sat up in his seat. Feeling somewhat revived, he started to say "Thank you, thank you, thank you" to his rescuer. The latter, after expressing his condolences for the danger and his

* The quotation is from the first line of Cicero's treatise *De officiis* (44 B.C.E.), and commonly interpreted to mean "Let military power yield to civilian power."

joy over the rescue, exclaimed, "Ah!" smacking his hand against his bald forehead, "*Que dirà de esto su excelencia,* who is already jinxed by that damned Casale Monferrato, which refuses to surrender? *Que dirà el Conde Duque,* the Count-Duke, who scowls if a leaf makes too much noise? *Que dirà el rey nuestro señor,* His Royal Majesty, who will, of course, have to be informed of such an uprising? And will that be the end of it? *Dios lo sabe!*" "I want nothing more to do with it," said the Commissioner, "I quit. I don't want to hear another word about it. I place my resignation in the hands of Your Excellency, and I will go off to live in a cave, on a mountain, and become a hermit, far from these brutes."

"*Usted* will do what is deemed most suitable *por el servicio de su magestad,*" was the Grand Chancellor's solemn reply.

What became of his proposal our author does not say, for after accompanying the poor man all the way to the castle, he makes no further mention of him.

Chapter 14

The rest of the crowd started to disperse, fanning out to the right and left, down this or that street. Some went home to look after their own affairs. Some took off for a little breathing room after hours of being hemmed in. Some sought out their friends, to regale them with stories of the day's big events. There were so few people left behind that the Spanish troops were able to advance easily and take up position at the Commissioner's house, meeting no resistance. Nearby some of the dregs of the uprising, if we can call them that, were still loitering about. A gang of troublemakers, unhappy with such a cold, imperfect end to such a great spectacle: Some grumbled, some swore, some conferred to see if anything else could still be done. As if to test the poor door to the Commissioner's house, which had been roughly propped up again, they kept beating and pounding on it. Upon the arrival of the troops, they all headed in the opposite direction, some immediately, others more reluctantly, leaving the battlefield open to the soldiers, who reclaimed it and stood guard by the house and the road. All the neighboring streets were still dotted with little clusters of people, however. Every time that two or three people would gather, another three, four, or twenty would join them. Here one might break away, but then, a whole cluster would move in unison, like a cloudbank that occasionally breaks apart to travel across the clear blue sky after a storm, leading a person looking up to say: "The weather is not getting any better."

Imagine the babble of speech. Some people loudly described particular incidents they had witnessed. Some related what they

themselves had done. Some were relieved that all had ended well, and praised Ferrer, predicting serious troubles ahead for the Commissioner. Some scoffed, saying, "They won't kill him! Wolves never devour one another." Some grumbled, irritably, that they'd done it all wrong, that they'd been duped, that they were crazy to have made such a ruckus and then allowed themselves to be fooled.

In the meantime, the sun had set and everything had taken on the same hue. Many people, exhausted from the day and tired of chatting in the dark, started to head home. Our young man, Renzo, after helping the carriage pass for as long as help was needed, and walking behind it, between the rows of soldiers, as if in triumph, was relieved to see it moving freely and out of danger. He moved among the crowd for a bit and then broke away, at the first street corner, so that he, too, could breathe more freely. After a few steps in the clear, still overwhelmed by so many feelings and images jumbled together, he was overcome by the great need to eat and to rest. He turned his gaze upward, from one side of the street to the other, looking for a tavern sign, since it was too late to go back to the Capuchin monastery.

Walking with his head in the clouds, he almost bumped into a cluster of people. He stopped for a second and overheard them speculating on and planning actions for the next day. As he listened, he could not resist putting in his own two cents, feeling he had every right after contributing so much to that afternoon. Everything he'd seen that day had persuaded him that, to get things done, all you had to do was win the sympathies of the passersby.

"Good sirs," he shouted, by way of an introduction, "may I also offer my modest opinion? Bakeries aren't the only places cheating us. If there's one thing we've learned today, it's that when we raise our voices, we get justice. We have to keep going until every wrong has been made right, and the world is a little more humane. Is it not true, good sirs, that a handful of tyrants have twisted the 'Thou shalt nots' of the Commandments into 'Thou shall'? The same men harass the meek—who pay them no mind—and do all kinds of bad things to them, but they're always in the right? Indeed, when they've

done something even worse than usual, they walk with their heads held higher, as if we should thank them for it! I'm sure that Milan has its share of them."

"Unfortunately," chimed in one voice.

"Like I was saying," continued Renzo, "where I come from, we've all heard the same stories. And the facts speak for themselves. Let's say, for instance, that one of those tyrants lives part of the time in the country, and part in Milan. Now, if he's a devil in one place, then he can't be an angel in the other, seems to me. So tell me, good sirs, have you ever seen one of these crooks with his face behind bars? What's worse (and this I know for a fact) is that to punish them, we've got decrees, good ones—signed, sealed, and printed. Not just words slapped on paper, either. Really well-written decrees! You couldn't hope for better! They name the crimes in black and white, just the way they happen. And each crime has its own punishment. And they say: 'These are for you, no matter who you are, country and common folk and I don't know who else.' But try asking the lawyers—that bunch of scribes and Pharisees!—to help you get justice with these decrees.* They'll no sooner listen to you than the Pope will. It's enough to make an honest man's head spin. You can tell as clear as day that the King and the rulers want the bad guys to be punished, but nothing gets done because there's a league of powerful men. Well, we need to break it up. Tomorrow morning we need to go to Ferrer: now there's an upright man for you, someone you can talk to! Today you could see how happy he was to be with the people, how he was trying to listen to everyone, and how graciously he answered. We have to go to Ferrer and tell him what's going on. And boy, have I got some stories to tell. Things I've seen with my own two eyes: a decree, with the royal seal on top, signed by three bigwigs, and each one had his name printed at the bottom, and one of those names was Ferrer's, I saw it with my own

* In Matthew 23:2–3, Jesus denounces the hypocrisy of the "scribes and Pharisees" who "sit in Moses's seat," but do not practice what they preach, "for they say, and do not."

two eyes. Well, this decree was tailor-made for my case, and when I went to a lawyer, and asked him to help me get justice, like those three gentlemen intended—including Ferrer—this lawyer, the very man who showed me the decree, can you believe it? He acted like I was crazy. And I'm sure when Ferrer, kind nice old man, hears the stuff they pulled on me, since he can't know everything that's going on, especially outside the city, well, he'll want to set things straight, and he'll fix it. And the other guys, too: If they make the decrees, they must want to see them obeyed. Since to ignore them is also an insult, their name on an epitaph. And if the bullies refuse to fall in line, and keep acting crazy, we'll help like we did today. I'm not saying that Ferrer himself has to go around in his carriage to round up all the crooks, bullies, and tyrants: He'd need Noah's ark to do that! What he needs to do is order the guys in charge—and not just in Milan but everywhere—to do what the decrees say. And to bring to justice everyone who's committed those crimes. When it says *prison,* send them to prison. When it says *galleys,* send them to the galleys. And tell the mayors to do their job! If they don't, send them packing and appoint someone better. Like I say, we'll be there to lend a hand. And order the lawyers to listen to the poor and to defend what's right. Do you agree, good sirs?"

Renzo's words were so heartfelt that, from the start, much of the crowd stopped talking, turned to him, and listened. His audience responded with a vague smattering of applause, a few shouts of, "Bravo, you're right! Sad but true!" There were also a few critics, however. "Yeah, right," said one, "let's listen to the hill people. They all think they're lawyers!" Then he left. Another muttered, "Now every lowlife is going to speak his mind, and with everyone putting in their own two cents, the price of bread won't come down, and that's what we're fighting for." But Renzo only heard the compliments. Some shook one hand. Some shook the other. "See you tomorrow!" "Where?" "Piazza Duomo." "Very good. Very good." "We're going to do something. We're going to do something."

"Which of you kind sirs can show me the way to a tavern where a poor boy can get a bite to eat and a bed to sleep in?" asked Renzo.

"At your service, young man," said one man who had been listening carefully to his sermon, and hadn't uttered a word. "I've got the very place for you. A tavern where I know the owner, a friend and an honest man. I'll put in a good word for you."

"Nearby?" asked Renzo. "Not far," replied the man.

The gathering broke up and Renzo, after shaking the hands of several strangers, headed off with this particular stranger, thanking him for his kindness.

"Speak nothing of it," the man replied, "one hand washes the other, and together they wash your face. Aren't we supposed to help our neighbor?" As they walked, he asked Renzo, as if to pass the time, first one, then another question.

"Not to stick my nose into your business, but you look very tired. Where are you coming from?"

"I'm coming," replied Renzo, "all the way from Lecco."

"All the way from Lecco? You're from Lecco?"

"Yes, from Lecco . . . from that area, I mean."

"Poor boy! From what you were saying earlier, it sounds like they really put you through the mill."

"Ah, my good man, I had to watch my words back there, and not talk about my business in public. But . . . enough. One day the truth will come out, and then . . . Ah, here I see an innkeeper's sign, and for the life of me, I can't take another step."

"No, no, not here. The place I have in mind isn't much farther," said his guide, "you won't like it here."

"I don't care," replied the young man, "I'm not a little lord accustomed to sleeping on cotton. All I need is some food in my belly and a straw pallet to lie on. The sooner the better. My prayers are answered!" With that he entered through a dilapidated doorway over which a sign hung depicting the full moon. "All right, if you insist," said the stranger, and he followed him in.

"No need to trouble yourself anymore," said Renzo. "But," he added, "if you'd like to join me for a glass, it'd be my pleasure."

"I accept your invitation," the man answered. Since he was familiar with the establishment, he went in ahead of Renzo, passing

through a small courtyard. He walked up to the door that led to the kitchen, lifted the latch, opened the door, and entered with his companion.

A dim light shone from two hand lanterns hanging on poles attached to the ceiling beams. Several men were seated, though not idly, on benches to either side of a long narrow table that occupied almost one whole side of the room. Napkins and plates alternated with playing cards, faceup and facedown, dice tossed and picked up, bottles and glasses. A brisk trade was going on in coins of various denominations: *berlinghe, reals,* and *parpagliole.* If those coins could talk, they probably would have said, "This morning we were in the baker's till, or in the pocket of a bystander so intent on watching the uprising that he forgot to mind his personal affairs." The noise was deafening. A scullery boy raced back and forth, waiting on the combined dining and gambling table. The innkeeper was sitting on a small bench by the hood of the fireplace, pretending to busy himself with the tongs, making and erasing figures in the ashes, while actually listening to everything going on around him. At the clinking of the latch he stood up and went to meet the new arrivals. Seeing the guide, he said to himself, "Damn him! Always showing up when he's least wanted!" After a quick glance at Renzo, he said, to himself, "I don't know you, but you're either hare or hound if you're in the company of a hunter like him. Let me hear a couple of words and I'll know." None of these thoughts were reflected in the innkeeper's face, which was as still as a portrait: round and shiny with a thick red beard and two piercing blue eyes.

"What might I get for you gentlemen?" he said aloud.

"First, a good bottle of honest wine," said Renzo, "and then a bite to eat." At that, he plopped down on a bench, near the head of the table, and let out a sonorous, "Ah!" as if to say, "After being on my feet all day, there's nothing better than a nice bench." But he was immediately reminded of the bench and the table where he had sat down with Lucia and Agnese for the last time, and he sighed. He shook his head as if to expel the thought, and saw the host arriving with the wine. His companion sat down across from him. Renzo

immediately poured him a glass, saying, "Just to wet your lips," and, after filling the other glass, downed it in a single gulp.

"What've you got to eat?" he asked the host.

"I've got stew. Would you like some?" the man answered.

"Good, yes, some stew."

"Coming right up," said the host to Renzo. To the boy he barked, "Take care of this stranger," and he headed back to the fireplace. "But," he stopped to say, "I'm afraid I don't have any bread today."

"Bread?" said Renzo in a loud voice, laughing. "Providence has taken care of that!" He took out the third and last loaf of the bread he had found at the foot of the San Dionigi cross, held it up high, and shouted, "Here is the bread of Providence!"

Many heads turned at the sound of his exclamation. Seeing that trophy held aloft, one man shouted, "Hurrah for cheap bread!"

"Cheap?" said Renzo. "No, bread by the grace and love of God."

"Better yet!"

"But," Renzo added immediately, "I would not want you gentlemen to misunderstand. It's not that I filched it, as they say. I found it on the ground. And if I could find its owner, I'd gladly pay him for it."

"Bravo! Bravo!" his companions shouted, snickering even louder. The thought that he might be telling the truth did not occur to a single man.

"You think I'm joking, but I'm not," said Renzo to his guide. Turning the bread over in his hand, he added, "Look at how they treated it. Now it looks like flatbread! But there were so many people. If someone with tender bones had leaned down to grab it, he'd have been crushed." After biting off three or four mouthfuls, he chased it down with a second glass of wine, adding, "This bread won't go down by itself. My throat has never been so dry. All that shouting!"

"Prepare a good bed for this young man," the guide said, "because he'd like to spend the night."

Approaching his table, the host asked Renzo, "You want to sleep here?"

"I sure do," replied Renzo, "any bed will do, as long as the sheets are freshly washed. I may be a poor boy, but I'm used to cleanliness."

"Oh, that reminds me," said the innkeeper. He went to the counter, in a corner of the kitchen, and came back with an inkpot and a blank sheet of paper in one hand and a pen in the other.

"What's this for?" exclaimed Renzo, swallowing a spoonful of the stew that the boy had set in front of him. Then, smiling in surprise, he added, "Is this what you call a clean sheet?" The host, without answering, set the inkpot and the paper on the table. He propped his left arm and right elbow against the same table, and staring at Renzo with the pen in the air, he asked, "If you don't mind, could I have your first name, last name, and place of birth?"

"What?" cried Renzo. "What's all this got to do with a bed?"

"I'm doing my duty," said the innkeeper, looking the guide right in the face. "We are required to account for everyone who comes to us for lodgings: first name, last name, place of birth, nature of their business here, whether or not they are bearing arms, length of stay: That's what the decree says."

Before answering, Renzo emptied another glass. It was his third, and from this point on I'm afraid we'll lose count. Then he said, "Ah, of course, the decree! And I just so happen to be a doctor of law, so I know what they make of the decrees."

"I'm telling you the truth," said the host, still staring at Renzo's mute companion. Going back to the counter, he removed from the drawer a large sheet of paper, an original printed copy of the decree, and came over to unfold it before Renzo's eyes.

"Ah, now I see," the boy exclaimed, raising his refreshed glass and emptying it in one gulp. Extending his other hand, he pointed a finger at the decree. "Here's the page from your missal. Oh joy. I recognize that coat of arms. I know the meaning of that infidel's face." (On the top of the decrees they would print the Governor's coat of arms. Don Gonzalo Fernández de Córdoba's bore a prominent figure of a Moorish king with a chain around his neck.) "What that face means is, 'Command if you can; obey if you want.' Once

this face has sentenced to the galleys Don . . . never mind, I know who he is. I tell you what. When another sheet from the same missal allows an honest young man to marry an honest young woman who is happy to marry him, then I'll tell my name to that face, and throw in a kiss, too. I might have good reasons for not giving my name. And this scoundrel probably has a bunch of other scoundrels working for him, because if he were alone . . ." He ended his sentence with a gesture. "If a scoundrel wanted to know where I was, to play some dirty trick on me, I wonder whether that face would do anything to protect me. And now I'm supposed to tell you my business? That's new. Let's suppose I came to Milan to confess. In that case I'm going to confess to a Capuchin friar, not to an innkeeper."

The man fell silent and continued to stare at the guide, whose face remained expressionless. Renzo, I am sad to report, downed yet another glass and kept on talking. "I'll give you a good reason, my dear sir, that you can understand. If the decrees that say the right things, to help good Christians, don't count, then the ones that say bad things shouldn't count, either. Now will you get this rubbish out of my face and bring me another bottle of wine, since this one is empty?" As he spoke, he tapped on it with his knuckles and added, "Can you hear that, sir? Can you hear that hollow sound?"

Renzo had once again managed to gradually attract the attention of the people around him, and once again his audience applauded him.

"What am I supposed to do?" asked the innkeeper, looking at the stranger, who was no stranger to him.

"Come on, come on," shouted many of the tavern guests, "the boy is right. It's all a nuisance, a trick, a pain! Every day a new law." In the midst of these cries, the stranger gave the innkeeper a disapproving look, for questioning him too directly, and remarked, "Leave him be. Don't make a scene."

"I did my duty," said the innkeeper aloud. And then, to himself, "Now I've got my back against the wall," and he took the paper, the pen, the ink, the decree, and the empty bottle, and gave them to the scullery boy.

"Bring me one more of the same," said Renzo, "it's a good honest wine. And we'll down it just like we did the last one, without demanding its first and last name, place of birth, reason for coming here, and how long it intends to stay."

"More of the same," said the innkeeper to the boy, and went back to sit by the fireplace. "He's a hare, all right," he thought, sketching in the ashes again, "and look whose hands he's fallen into. What a fool! If you want to drown yourself, go right ahead. But don't go sticking me in the middle. The Luna Piena's innkeeper wants no part of your madness!"

Renzo thanked the guide and all the others who had taken his side. "Good job, my friends!" he said. "Now I can really see that honest men help each other out." Then, extending his right hand over the table, and assuming the posture of a preacher once more, "How wonderful," he exclaimed, "that all those who rule the world want to stick paper, pen, and inkpot into everything! Always with a pen in the air! What an obsession these great men have for using a pen!"

"My good friend from the country," laughed one of the gamblers, who was winning, "do you want to know why?"

"Tell me," answered Renzo.

"I will," the man said. "The ruling class eats a lot of goose, and ends up with so many quills, they've got to do something with them!"

Everyone burst out laughing, except for his opponent, who was losing.

"Aha," said Renzo, "a poet. So we've got poets here, too. Nowadays they're born everywhere. I've got a poetic vein myself, and sometimes I come up with some very curious verses . . . but only when things are going well."

To understand poor Renzo's babbling, you need to know that among the common people of Milan, and even more among those in the countryside, *poet* does not mean, as all good men would have it, a sacred talent, a dweller of Mount Parnassus, a disciple of the Muses. It means a bizarre and somewhat eccentric soul whose

speech and behavior are clever and odd, rather than sensible. Which shows you how intrepid common bunglers are at twisting words around to make them say the exact opposite of what they mean! For, I ask you, what's the connection between being a poet and being eccentric?

"I'll tell you the real reason," Renzo continued, "it's because they hold the pen. So if they misspeak, the words are conveniently swept away by the wind. But if a poor kid says something, they pay close attention and skewer his words from the air with that pen and nail them to a sheet of paper, to use against him at the right time and place. They've got another trick, too. When they want to trick a poor kid who never went to school but who still has a good . . . what I'm trying to say is . . ." he trailed off, but he tapped, almost beat his index finger against his forehead to help them understand. "And if they realize that you're catching on to them, in a heartbeat, they toss in a few words of Latin, to distract and confuse. Enough! This practice has to stop! Today, thank goodness, everything was done in the language of the people, and without pen, paper, or inkpot. And tomorrow, if people know how to behave, we'll do even better, without harming a hair on anyone's head. And in the name of justice."

Meanwhile some of his listeners had gone back to gambling, others to eating, and many more to shouting. Some people left, others arrived, and the innkeeper kept an eye on everyone. All of which has nothing to do with our story. The mysterious guide couldn't wait to slip away. He did not seem to have any business there, but he did not want to leave before chatting a little more with Renzo. He turned to him and started talking about bread again. After repeating some of the sentences that had been bantered about the room, he announced an idea of his own. "Well, if I were in charge," he said, "I'd find a way to make things work better."

"What would you do?" asked Renzo, looking at him with two eyes that were glassier than they should be, and twisting his mouth slightly, in an effort to pay closer attention.

"What would I do?" he said. "I'd make sure there was bread for everyone. Enough for the poor and enough for the rich."

"Ah, that's the spirit," said Renzo.

"Here's what I'd do. Set an honest price so that everyone can manage. And then, distribute bread according to the number of mouths to feed: because there are greedy pigs, who want everything for themselves, and grab as much as their hands can carry. After which there's not enough bread for the poor. So we need to divvy up the bread. How, you ask? Here's how: Give a bakery voucher to each family, based on the number of mouths to feed. To me, for example, they'd give a voucher that says, 'Ambrogio Fusella, profession swordsmith, with wife and four children, all old enough to eat bread (pay attention now): You get X amount of bread for X amount of money.' But fair, always based on the number of mouths to feed. Take you, for example, they should make out a voucher to . . . what did you say your name was?"

"Lorenzo Tramaglino," said the young man who, enthralled by the proposal, didn't notice that it was all based on paper, pen, and ink, and that, for it to work, the first step would be to write down people's names.

"Very good," said the stranger, "do you have a wife and children?"

"I ought to . . . no children . . . too soon . . . but my wife . . . if things had gone the way they're supposed to . . ."

"You're unmarried. So you'd have to be patient, only a small ration for you."

"As it should be, but soon, as I hope . . . and with the help of God . . . Enough! And if I had a wife, too?"

"Then the voucher would be changed and the ration increased. Like I said, always on the basis of the number of mouths to feed," said the stranger, standing up.

"That's what I like to hear!" shouted Renzo, and he went on, raising his voice and pounding his fists on the table. "So why don't they make a law like that?"

"Don't ask me. For now it's good night and time for me to leave, since I think my wife and children have been waiting for me long enough."

"One more drop, just another drop," cried Renzo, quickly filling the man's glass. Standing up immediately and grabbing him by the hem of his doublet, he gave a strong tug to make him sit down again. "One more drop, otherwise I'll be offended."

But his friend freed himself with a yank, and, leaving Renzo in his knot of pleas and reproaches, he repeated, "Good night," and was out the door. Renzo continued to harangue him, but the man was already on the street. Renzo sank back down on the bench, stared at the glass that he'd filled, and seeing the boy pass by, gestured at him to come over, as if he had some business to discuss. Then he pointed to his glass, and in a slow, solemn voice, articulating his words in a very particular way, said, "See, I poured wine for that good man. Did you see? Right to the brim, like a friend, but he didn't want it. Sometimes people misunderstand a gesture like that. It's not my fault. I did it out of the goodness of my heart. But now that I have, we can't let it go to waste." At that, he took the glass and emptied it in one gulp.

"I understand," said the boy, walking away.

"Ah! So you understand, too," Renzo went on. "Then it's true. When what's right is right . . . !"

Here it will take all my love of the truth to make me faithfully continue a tale that does so little credit to such an important character: the hero of our story, you could almost say. But for the same love of impartiality, again, I should point out that this was the first time anything like this had happened to Renzo: And it was precisely his naïveté that made this first encounter with drunkenness so fatal. The first few glasses had gone straight to his head. He had tossed them back, one after the other—so unlike him—in part because he was so parched, in part because of a certain altered state, which allowed him to do nothing in moderation. For a more experienced drinker, this would have done little more than slake his thirst. Our anonymous source made an observation in this regard that I will

repeat, for what it's worth. One of the advantages of temperate and honest habits, he says, is that the more inveterate and rooted they are in a man, the more easily, the more immediately he suffers their loss the minute he veers away from them. So he remembers it for a long time after, and even a blunder teaches him a lesson.

Whatever the case may be, when those first fumes rose to Renzo's head, wine and words continued to flow, one down and the others up, without rhyme or reason. At the point where we left him, he was managing as best he could. He had a strong urge to speak, and there was no shortage of listeners, or at least of men present whom he could treat as listeners. For a while his words flowed unbidden, and allowed themselves to fall into some kind of order. Little by little, however, finishing sentences started to become monstrously difficult. The thought that appeared so vividly and resolutely in his mind would suddenly fog up and evaporate. And his words, after keeping him waiting for a bit, would turn out to be not quite right. Amid these tribulations, by one of those false instincts that can ruin a man, he reached for that damned bottle. Will someone with a lick of sense tell me what good a bottle does in such a circumstance?

I am relating only some of the many words he spouted on that fateful evening. The many more that I am leaving out would be too unbecoming, for not only did they make no sense, they did not even try to, which is a prerequisite for a printed book.

"Innkeeper? Mr. Innkeeper?" he started again, following him with his eye around the table or by the hood of the fireplace, sometimes staring at him when he wasn't there, and always talking amid the uproar of the brigade. "What kind of an innkeeper are you? I can't get over it . . . that stuff about my first name, last name, and trade. Asking a boy like me . . . ! That wasn't right. Where's the satisfaction, the point, the pleasure . . . in writing up a poor kid on your papers? Am I right, men? Innkeepers should always take the side of poor boys . . . Listen, listen, sir. I want to make a comparison . . . because . . . They're laughing, hey? Yes, I'm a little tipsy . . . but it doesn't mean I'm wrong. Tell me, who do you get your business

from? From poor boys, right? Am I right? You tell me whether the men with the decrees ever come by here for a glass."

"They only drink water," said a man sitting near Renzo.

"They want to keep their wits about them," added another, "so they can tell their lies with a straight face."

"Ah!" cried Renzo, "The poet has spoken. Then you understand my reasons, too. So answer me this, sir. Has Ferrer, who's the best of the bunch, ever come here to lift a glass and to spread the wealth? And that murderous dog, Dòn . . . I'd better shut up now, because I've got too much on my mind. Ferrer and Padre Crrrrrr . . . now those are two good men, and there aren't too many like them around. The old are worse than the young, and the young . . . even worse than the old! But I'm happy there was no bloodshed. That kind of barbarity is best left in the hands of the executioner. Bread? Oh, yes. I got pushed around . . . but I gave as good as I got. Make way! Times of plenty! Hurrah! . . . Yet, even Ferrer . . . a few little words in Latin . . . *siés baraòs trapolorum* . . . Damn bad habit! . . . Hurrah! Justice! Bread! Now those are words to live by! . . . Back home I could have used some honest men . . . when that damned dong, dong, dong started up, and then again, dong, dong, dòng. Otherwise he wouldn't have gotten away. And we'd have kept the priest there . . . I know who's to blame!"

At these words he lowered his head and stayed that way for a while, as if lost in thought. Then he heaved a sigh, and looked up, with two damp, shiny eyes, and such a raw, maudlin look of distress that it's a good thing the object of his affection could not see him in that moment. But the ruffians who were already making fun of Renzo's passionate and muddled eloquence were even more amused by his air of contrition. The men sitting closest to him said to the others, "Look," and everyone turned his way, making him the laughingstock of the room. Not that everyone else was in their right mind, or that their minds had ever been right in the first place, but the truth is that no one was more out of his mind than poor Renzo. Especially since he was a peasant. They all started, first one and then the other, to tease him with vulgar or silly questions. One min-

ute Renzo seemed to take it badly, the next minute as a joke, and then, ignoring all those other voices, he would speak about something else. He would respond, then he would ask questions, always jumping around, always off topic. Luckily, in the midst of his raving, he maintained an instinctive caution to avoid naming names, so that what must have been foremost on his mind did not slip out. For it would have been truly regrettable if her name, for which I, too, feel a little affection and respect, had been bandied about on those unsavory tongues like a plaything.

Chapter 15

The innkeeper, seeing no end in sight, approached Renzo while asking the others, politely, to leave him alone. He shook him by the arm, trying to persuade him that it was time to go to bed. But Renzo kept ranting about first and last names, decrees, and good boys like himself. After enough repetitions, however, those two words, *bed* and *sleep,* finally entered his head, making him feel the need for what they signified, and producing a brief moment of lucidity. That flicker of regained consciousness made him vaguely sense how little of it he had left, the way the last candle burning illuminates the others that are spent. He mustered his courage, stretched out his hands, and pressed them against the table. He tried once or twice to right himself, took a deep breath, staggered, and, on the third try, with the innkeeper's help, managed to stand up straight. The innkeeper, continuing to prop him up, helped him to emerge from between the table and the bench. In one hand he held a lamp, and with the other he guided and dragged Renzo as best he could toward the staircase door. There Renzo, hearing the clamor of "Good night," shouted after him, twisted around so abruptly that, if his supporter hadn't so deftly grabbed his arm, that twist would have turned into a tumble. As I was saying, he twisted and with his one free arm he sliced and engraved his goodbyes in the air, in the shape of Solomon's knot.*

"Off to bed with you," said the innkeeper, dragging him along.

* The Solomon's knot is a decorative motif, found in classical Roman mosaics, of two interlaced ovals.

He got him through the door and, with an even greater effort, pulled him up to the top of the stairs and into the room he had assigned to him. At the sight of the bed awaiting him, Renzo's mood lifted. He looked at the innkeeper affectionately, eyes like fireflies lighting up, then eclipsed by his exhaustion. He tried to steady himself and extend his hand to the innkeeper's face to pinch his cheek in a sign of friendship and appreciation, but he couldn't reach. "Good man!" he managed to say. "Now I can see that you are a gentleman: This is a good deed, giving a bed to an honest man. But making me look bad down there, with all that stuff about my first and last name, that wasn't very nice. Lucky for me I'm no fool . . ."

The innkeeper, who didn't believe that Renzo could still think straight, and knew from experience how men in that condition are more subject to mood swings, decided to take advantage of that moment of lucidity to give it another try. "Dear boy," he said, with his kindest voice and manner, "I didn't do it to annoy you, or to stick my nose into your business. What do you expect? It's the law. We have to obey it, too, otherwise we'll be the first to get hit with a fine. Better to do what they want and . . . is it such a big deal in the end? A couple of words? Not for their sake, but as a favor to me. Come on, just between the two of us, let's take care of it. Tell me your name and . . . and then you can go to bed with a light heart."

"You rascal!" Renzo exclaimed. "You trickster! There you go again! Bringing up this nonsense about first name, last name, and business in the city!"

"Oh, shut up, you fool. Go to bed," said the innkeeper.

But Renzo only got louder. "Now I get it. You're in league with them, too. Wait and see. I'll show you." Turning toward the stairs, he started to holler even louder. "Friends, listen up. The innkeeper is in—"

"It was a joke!" the innkeeper shouted in Renzo's face, pushing him toward the bed. "It was a joke, couldn't you tell?"

"Oh, a joke? Well, that's more like it. When you say it was a joke . . . it really is a joke," and he fell face-first on the bed.

"Come now. Off with those clothes. And be quick about it," said

the innkeeper, adding some necessary assistance to his advice. Once Renzo had removed his doublet (no easy matter), the innkeeper grabbed it immediately, rummaging through the pockets to look for coins, and found some. Thinking that, the next day, his guest would have more on his mind than paying him, and that the money would probably fall into hands from which he couldn't extract it, he decided to see whether he couldn't at least conclude this transaction.

"You're a good boy, an honest man, right?"

"Good boy, honest man," Renzo mumbled, while his fingers struggled with the buttons of the clothes he still hadn't removed.

"Excellent," the innkeeper replied, "so let's settle your little bill, because tomorrow I have to go out to take care of a few errands . . ."

"What's fair is fair," said Renzo, "I may be crafty but I'm an honest man . . . But the money? Do I have to go looking for my money at this hour of the night?"

"Here it is," said the innkeeper, and by applying all his experience, all his patience, and all his skill, he managed to present his bill to Renzo and settle it.

"Give me a hand so I can get the rest of these things off," said Renzo. "I'm dead tired."

The innkeeper helped him with this request. He even put a blanket over him, and muttered a gruff "Good night," since Renzo was already snoring. And then, by that strange spell that sometimes makes us look upon an object of vexation as if it were affectionate (stemming from little more, perhaps, than our desire to understand something that has a powerful effect on us), he stopped for a moment to contemplate his inconvenient guest, raising the lamp over his face, and reflecting the light onto it with his outstretched hand. In that pose, he resembled pictures of Psyche when she sneaks a furtive peek at her unknown consort.* "You jackass," he whispered

* The "Tale of Cupid and Psyche" is told in *The Golden Ass,* by Apuleius. Cupid is the unseen lover of the princess Psyche, and only comes to her at night. Psyche is forbidden to set her eyes upon him. But one night, she lights a lamp so that she can gaze upon him. Startled by his beauty, she spills oil on him, waking him up, and causing him to flee.

to the poor slumberer. "You were asking for it! Tomorrow you can tell me if it was worth it. You rednecks, you think you can travel the world without knowing where the sun rises. But all you do is get yourself and your neighbor in trouble."

Having said or thought this, he drew away the lamp, stepped back, left the room, and locked the door. From the landing, he called up to his wife and told her to have one of the servant girls mind the children, so she could go down to the kitchen to take over for him. "I have to go out. Of all the bad luck, a foreigner ended up here, God knows how, I sure don't," and he briefly described the unfortunate set of circumstances. Then he added, "Keep an eye on everything. On a cursed day like today, the main thing is to be careful. We've got a handful of rabble-rousers downstairs who, between their drinking and being loudmouths already, God knows what they'll say. All it would take is one hothead to . . ."

"Shush, I'm not a child! You're not the only one who knows how to run this place. So far there's been no complaints about me!"

"All right, all right. Just make sure they pay! And if they start up about the Commissioner of Provision and the Governor and Ferrer and the Decurioni and the aristocrats and Spain and France and all that rubbish, just pretend you don't hear. Because if you disagree with them, things could get ugly very quickly. And if you agree, they could get ugly in the future. Anyway, if you hear certain remarks, turn around and say, 'I'll be right there,' as if someone were calling you from another corner of the room. I'll try to get back as soon as I can."

At this, he went downstairs with her to the kitchen and looked around to see if anything new had happened. Then he took his hat and cloak off a peg, grabbed a cudgel from the corner, and, with another stern look, repeated to his wife the instructions he had given. Meanwhile, he thought back to the speech he had begun at poor Renzo's bedside, and as he walked down the street, he picked up where he had left off.

"Stubborn mountain boy!" No matter how hard Renzo had tried to conceal his identity, his origins were plain to see in his words, his

tone, his appearance, and his movement. "On a day like today, by being politic, by keeping my head about me, I could have come out unscathed, but you had to come along and upset the apple cart. With all the taverns in Milan, why did you have to choose mine? If you'd at least come alone, I could have turned a blind eye. But no, you came with company. And what's worse, in the company of a police agent!"

At every step of the way, the innkeeper ran into unaccompanied pedestrians, couples, or groups of people whispering as they went, and at this point in his silent allocution, he saw a patrol of soldiers coming toward him. Stepping aside to let them pass, he looked at them from the corner of his eyes and said to himself, "Here comes the crackdown. And you, you see a few people raising hell and what bright idea do you come up with, you jackass? That the world has to change! And with this bright idea you ruin yourself and try to ruin me while you're at it. It's not right! I did everything I could to save you, and you, you ignoramus, you repay me by raising a stink in my tavern! You're going to have to get out of this mess by yourself! I'm going to do what's best for me. As if I wanted to know your name out of curiosity! What do I care if your name is Thaddeus or Bartholomew?* Do you think I like writing things down? You're not the only one who wants to do things his own way! I know there are decrees that don't count: what a discovery, and from the lips of a mountain boy! But what you don't know is that for innkeepers the decrees do count! You think you can travel the world, running your mouth? If you want to do things your way, and pretend the decrees don't exist, you'd better learn to watch your words. Do you know the reward awaiting the poor innkeeper who follows your example and doesn't ask the names of the people who grace him with their presence, you idiot? *A fine of three hundred scudi shall be levied, as mentioned above, on said host, innkeeper, and others*—see, that's where they stuck in the three hundred scudi fine, and do you know how they

* Thaddeus and Bartholomew were two of the twelve apostles, but in Milanese dialect their names had vulgar connotations equivalent to idiocy.

spend it?—*two-thirds of which shall be paid to the Royal Treasury, and the rest to the accuser or informer:* nice guy, your companion! *And in the event of inability to pay, five years on the galleys and an additional monetary or corporal punishment at the discretion of His Excellency.* Much obliged to Your Grace!"

With these words the innkeeper set foot on the threshold of the courthouse.

Here, as in all government buildings, there was a whirlwind of activity. Everywhere people were rushing about, issuing the orders that seemed most effective for preventing disorder the next day and to reduce the opportunities and ardor of the people clamoring for more riots, while keeping power in the hands of those accustomed to wielding it. Reinforcements were being added to the troops guarding the Commissioner's house. Roads were being blocked with wooden beams and wagons. The bakers were all ordered to make bread around the clock. Couriers were dispatched to the surrounding towns, with orders to send grain to the city. A nobleman was assigned to each bakery, with orders to be there early in the morning, supervise distribution, and restrain the hotheads through the authority of his presence and the power of his words. But, as the saying goes, to strike one blow to the hoop and one to the cask, and reinforce their orders with an element of fear, the decision was also made to arrest a few of the rioters. This was where the police commissioner had to step in, and you can imagine how he felt about the riots and the rioters, with that bandage on the left side of his head. His spies had been in the field since the start of the uprising. And the so-called Ambrogio Fusella was, as the innkeeper had surmised, an undercover agent who had been sent out to nab red-handed anyone who could be identified, tailed, trapped, and arrested in the dead of night or sometime the next day. After hearing a few words of Renzo's soliloquy, he had immediately seen him as the perfect dupe, the very type of man he needed. When he learned that the boy was a newcomer to the city, he attempted the master stroke of leading him straight to jail, as if it were the safest tavern in the city. But his plan fell through, as we have seen. He was able, however, to

bring home a reliable report of his first name, last name, and hometown, in addition to one hundred and one other speculations. So when the innkeeper arrived at the courthouse to refer what he knew about Renzo, they already knew a lot more than he did. The innkeeper entered the customary room and gave his deposition: how a foreigner seeking lodging at his tavern had refused to give his name.

"You have done your duty by informing the authorities," said a criminal notary, laying his pen down, "but we already knew."

"Big secret," thought the innkeeper, "that took real genius!"

"And we also know," the notary continued, "his precious name."

"Damn! His name! How did they get that?" is what the innkeeper thought this time.

"But you," the man resumed with a stern expression, "are not telling the whole truth."

"What more do you want me to say?"

"Ah! We are well aware that he brought into your tavern a quantity of stolen bread, stolen violently, through looting and rioting."

"So a man comes in with bread in his pocket, I have no idea where he got it. But I swear on my life, I only saw one loaf."

"Of course. Excuses, excuses. You'd have us believe they're all honest men. Can you prove that the bread was purchased legally?"

"I don't have to prove anything! What's it got to do with me? I'm just the innkeeper."

"But do you deny that your customer had the impudence to offend the decrees, and to make insulting and irreverent remarks about His Excellency's coat of arms?"

"Pardon me, sir. How can he be my customer if this was the first time I'd seen him? It was the devil, with all due respect, who sent him to my establishment. And if I did know him, I would hardly have needed to ask his name."

"But at your tavern, and in your presence, inflammatory things were said. Rash words! Seditious ideas! Mutterings! Shouts! Protests!"

"How can your Lordship expect me to pay attention to the mis-

behavior of a bunch of loudmouths all talking at the same time? I have to tend to my business, since I'm a poor man. And your Lordship knows perfectly well that the loose-lipped can also get free with their fists, especially when there's a lot of them, and . . ."

"Yes, let them do and say what they like. You'll see whether they still feel like joking tomorrow morning. What are you thinking?"

"I'm not thinking anything."

"You think the riffraff have taken over Milan?"

"Of course not."

"You'll see, you'll see."

"I understand exactly what you're saying. The King will always be king. But anyone who played has got to pay. And a poor father doesn't want to get caught in the middle. But you're the ones with the power: You should take care of it."

"Are there still many people at your establishment?"

"Quite a few."

"And what is your customer doing? Is he still mouthing off? Getting people riled up? Plotting riots for tomorrow?"

"You mean the foreigner? He's gone to bed."

"So you still have a lot of guests on your hands . . . Well, make sure he doesn't get away."

"What, am I supposed to play the cop now?" said the innkeeper to himself, but he answered neither yes nor no.

"You're free to go. Don't forget to use your head," the notary continued.

"I always use my head. Your Lordship knows I've never been on the wrong side of the law."

"And don't go thinking the law has lost its grip."

"Me? Of course not. I don't think anything of the sort. All I care about is running my tavern."

"The usual story. You have nothing more to say?"

"What more do you want me to say? There's only one truth."

"Enough. We have your deposition. If anything comes up, you'll have to give a more detailed report to the courts, based on the questions they ask."

"What do I have to report? I don't know anything. All I can do is tend to my establishment."

"Make sure he doesn't leave."

"I hope the chief of police will be informed that I came to do my duty right away. I kiss your hands, my Lordship."

At the break of day, Renzo had been snoring for about seven hours and he was still—poor thing!—fast asleep when he was startled by two strong shakes to his arms and a voice at the foot of the bed shouting, "Lorenzo Tramaglino!" He woke, pulled away from those arms, struggled to open his eyes, and saw a man dressed in black standing at the foot of the bed and two armed men on either side of his pillow. Between his surprise at the rude awakening, and the hangover from the wine I'm sure you all remember, he was in a momentary daze. Thinking he was trapped in a dream he didn't like, he tossed and turned as if to wake himself up.

"So, you finally heard us, Lorenzo Tramaglino?" said the man in the black cape, the selfsame notary of the night before. "Get a move on it. Get up and come with us."

"Lorenzo Tramaglino?" asked Renzo Tramaglino. "How do you know my name? What do you want from me?"

"Quit talking and start moving," said one of the policemen, grabbing him by the arm again.

"What's the meaning of this outrage?" shouted Renzo, pulling his arm away. "Innkeeper! Oh, innkeeper! Where'd you disappear to?"

"Shall we take him away in his shirtsleeves?" asked the first policeman, turning to the notary.

"Do you understand what'll happen to you if you don't get up immediately and come with us?" the notary said to Renzo.

"Why should I?" asked Renzo.

"The police commissioner will tell you why."

"Me? I'm an honest man. I didn't do anything. And I can't believe . . ."

"All the better, all the better. That way we can clear the whole matter up quickly, with a couple of words, and you'll be free to go about your business."

"So let me go now," said Renzo, "I've got nothing to do with the law."

"Get a move on!" said one policeman.

"Are we really taking him away?" asked the other.

"Lorenzo Tramaglino!" repeated the notary.

"How do you know my name, sir?"

"Do your duty," said the notary to the policemen, who immediately grabbed hold of Renzo to pull him out of bed.

"Hey, don't touch the body of an honest man. What is this? . . . I can dress myself."

"Then get dressed immediately," said the notary.

"I will," replied Renzo, and he started to pick up the clothes tossed here and there on the bed, like flotsam washed up on a beach. As he got dressed, he kept saying, "But I don't want to go to the police commissioner. What does he want with me? Since you are mistreating me so unfairly, I want to be taken to Ferrer. Him I know. He's a good man. And he owes me a debt of gratitude."

"Yes, my boy, you'll be taken to Ferrer," replied the notary. In other circumstances he would have burst out laughing at such a request, but this was no time for laughter. On his way to the inn, he had already noticed a certain unrest in the streets. He couldn't tell whether it was the dregs of a revolt that still hadn't been completely suppressed, or the beginnings of a new one: people appearing, forming into an assembly, a crowd, an angry mob. And now, without appearing to listen, or at least trying not to, he could hear the noise from the street getting louder. He wanted to hurry, but he would also have preferred to lead Renzo away arm in arm, like an old friend, since, if they got into a struggle once they were on the street, they would still be three against one. So the notary cast a glance at the police officers as if to say: "Be patient and don't get the boy any more agitated than he already is." For his part, he tried to find the right words to calm him down.

Renzo, meanwhile, was taking his sweet time getting dressed, trying to remember as best he could the events of the previous day, and guessing correctly, or almost, that the decrees and that stuff

about first and last names must be at the bottom of everything. But how the devil did this man know his name? And what the devil had happened during the night to prompt the police to go out, unerringly, and arrest one of the good guys who, the day before, had played such an important role? And not all of those guys were still in bed, since Renzo had also noticed the noise from the street getting louder and louder. As he looked in the notary's face, he could see the anxiety the man was struggling, in vain, to conceal. So to verify his hunches and sound out the situation, as well as to buy time and hatch a plan for himself, he said, "Now I see what's at the bottom of all this: It's because of that business about my first and last name. Last night I was a little tipsy. Sometimes these innkeepers serve a deceitful wine; and sometimes, like I say, once you've had a few, you know, it's the wine that does the talking. But if that's all there is, I'm ready to do whatever you want. Besides, you already know my name. Who the devil told you?"

"Good boy," replied the notary with an affected kindness, "now you're talking sense. And take it from someone in the business, me: You're smarter than most. It's the best way to get this taken care of quickly and efficiently. With this attitude, we'll be done in two shakes of a lamb's tail, and you'll be free to go. But you see, my son, my hands are tied. I can't release you here and now as I would like. Come along, be quick, nothing to be afraid of, because when they see who you are, I'll put in a word . . . just leave it to me . . . Enough. Hurry up, my son."

"Ah, so you're not allowed to free me. I see," said Renzo, and he continued to get dressed, resisting the police's attempts to grab hold of him and make him hurry up.

"Will we be passing by Piazza Duomo?" he asked the notary.

"Wherever you like, whichever way is shortest, so that you can be released as quickly as possible," he answered, annoyed that he had to ignore Renzo's mysterious question, about which he would have liked to interrogate him a hundred times over. "Just my luck!" he thought. "Who should fall into my hands but a boy who, I can tell, wants nothing more than to spill his guts. And, if I had a little

time, off the record, through a friendly chat, I could get him to confess to anything I wanted, without torture. This is a boy you could take to prison, once the interrogation was over, even before he realized he was under arrest. Just my luck that he would fall into my lap at a moment like this! But what other choice do I have?" he said to himself, while keeping his ears pricked and his head tilted back. "Nothing I can do about it. Plus, there's a risk that today will be worse than yesterday."

These thoughts were further confirmed by a strange hubbub in the street. He couldn't resist pulling the curtain back, to have a look through the window. Outside of the inn, he saw a cluster of citizens who, at the patrol's order to disperse, had answered with insults; even after they were broken up, they continued to grumble. Still worse, in the notary's eyes, the soldiers could not have been more cordial. He closed the curtain and stood still for a moment, uncertain of whether to complete the operation or to leave Renzo guarded by the two policemen and run to the police commissioner and report what was happening on the street. "Well," he said to himself, "they'll tell me I'm good-for-nothing, lily-livered, that I should just follow orders. Time to face the music. Damn these riots! Damn this job!"

Renzo was finally ready, the notary's two minions by his side. The notary intimated to them not to be too aggressive, and said to Renzo, "Be a good boy. Now let's get a move on."

In the meantime Renzo, too, had been listening, seeing, and thinking. Now he was fully dressed, except for his doublet, which he was holding in one hand while rummaging through his pockets with the other. "Oh," he said, looking at the notary with a shocked expression, "what happened to the money and the letter I had in there. My good sir!"

"You'll get everything back in short order," said the notary, "once we've taken care of a few formalities. Come now, let's go."

"No, no, no," said Renzo, shaking his head. "I don't like this. I want my things back, good sir. I will account for my actions, but I want what's mine."

"Here, I'll show you that I trust you. Take 'em, and be quick," said the notary, removing the confiscated items from his breast pocket and handing them to Renzo with a sigh. Renzo, putting them back where they belonged, muttered between his teeth, "Keep your distance. You've been hanging around thieves so long that their habits have rubbed off on you."

The policemen were eager to punch Renzo, but the notary held them in check with a look, all the while saying to himself, "If you cross the line, we're going to make you pay, and with interest!"

As Renzo was putting on his doublet and getting his hat, the notary gestured to one of the policemen to lead the way downstairs. He sent the prisoner after him, then the other policeman, and then himself, too. Once they were in the kitchen—while Renzo was distracted, asking, "Where has he gone off to, that damn innkeeper?"—the notary gave another signal to the officers. They grabbed hold of the boy, one on the right and the other on the left, and quick as a flash bound his hands with devices that, by a hypocritical figure of speech, are called "handcuffs." They consisted (my apologies for descending into details unworthy of the gravity of our story, but they are required for the sake of clarity) of a piece of twine a little longer than the circumference of a normal wrist, fitted with two small pieces of wood at either end like pegs. The twine was wrapped around the prisoner's wrist, while the pegs were passed between the middle and ring fingers of the captor's hand, and held tight in his fist, so he could tighten the knot with a twist. This gave the police the means not only to secure the captive, but also to torture him if he resisted: This is why the twine was studded with knots.

Renzo struggled to wriggle out of them, shouting, "What kind of a trick is this? To an honest man . . . !" But the notary, who had just the right words for every painful event, urged, "Be patient! They're just doing their duty. What do you expect? These are mere formalities. Even we can't treat people the way we'd like to. And if we don't follow orders, we'll end up in even worse trouble than you! Be patient!"

As he was speaking, the two policemen gave the pegs another

twist. Renzo quieted down, like a skittish horse that feels its lips being pinched by the bit, and exclaimed, "Patient?"

"Good boy," said the notary, "that's the right way to get yourself out of this. We're just doing our job. It's uncomfortable, I know. Just behave, and you'll be out in a minute. And since I can see that you have the right attitude, and I feel inclined to help you, let me give you some free advice, for your own good. Listen carefully. I've got a lot of experience with these things. Walk straight ahead without looking around, without calling attention to yourself. That way no one will see—no one will notice what's going on—and your honor will remain intact. In an hour you'll be as free as a bird. There's so much going on that they'll want to handle your case quickly. I'll put in a good word, too . . . Then you can go about your business and no one will know that you had a scrape with the law. And the two of you," he continued, turning to the policemen with a stern look on his face, "be careful not to hurt him, since he's under my protection. Do your duty, but remember that he's an honest man, a fine upstanding man, who will be free very shortly, and he cares very much about his honor. Walk in a way that doesn't attract attention, as if you were three gentlemen out for a stroll." And with a commanding tone and a menacing brow, he concluded, "Do you understand?" Turning to Renzo, with his brow now unfurrowed and his face suddenly more cheerful, as if to say, "We really are your friends," he whispered again, "Follow my lead. Walk with your head down, and quietly. Trust this man who cares about you. Let's go." And the party set off.

Renzo didn't believe a word of it: not that the notary preferred him to the police; not that he cared about Renzo's reputation; not that he intended to help him. He was well aware that the notary, fearing that an opportunity for his prisoner to escape would arise once they were on the street, was professing these fine sentiments to distract him from taking notice and taking advantage. So all the man's precautions served only to confirm the plan Renzo already had in mind: to do the exact opposite.

None of this should lead you to think that the notary was new or

unpracticed in deception, because you'd be wrong. He was a seasoned master of the art, according to our historian, who seems to have been one of his friends. At that moment, however, the notary was very agitated. In a calmer state of mind, believe me, he would have laughed at anyone who thought they could trick a person into doing something suspect by coaxing, encouraging, or dispensing friendly, disinterested advice. But it is a general tendency of men, when they are agitated and distressed, and recognize that another person could get them out of a bind, to demand cooperation insistently, repeatedly, with all kinds of excuses.

When swindlers are distressed and agitated, they, too, follow this same general rule. And in circumstances like these, they end up looking pathetic. The masterly tricks, the refined cunning by which they usually get their way, are almost second nature for them. Used at the right time, with the necessary composure, these expedients usually help them achieve their goal so surely and so covertly—and overtly, as well—that they are showered with universal praise when they succeed. But when these poor men are in dire straits, they use their ruses hastily, haphazardly, with neither manners nor grace. As a result, anyone who sees them scheming and striving is moved to both pity and laughter, and the man they hope to entrap, even if he is not so smart, can easily detect their ploy, and be inspired to turn their tricks against them. So you should never tire of urging professional swindlers to stay calm, or even better, to maintain the upper hand.

The moment they were on the street, Renzo began to look near and far, side to side, make himself conspicuous, and listen carefully. People did not seem to be gathering in any unusual way, however. And although some faces suggested a hint of the rebel, everyone continued on his or her way, with no sense of rebellion.

"Use your head, use your head!" the notary whispered behind his back. "Think of your honor, my son." But when Renzo, paying close attention to three men with angry faces coming his way, overheard them talking about a bakery, hidden flour, and justice, he tried to attract their attention by grimacing and coughing in a way that in-

dicated anything but a cold. The men took a closer look at the convoy and stopped, as did others who were arriving. At the sound of murmuring, others who had passed by turned around and came back.

"Watch yourself, boy, use your head. Don't go ruining this. It'll only make things worse for yourself. Think of your honor, your reputation," the notary continued to whisper. But Renzo acted up even more. The police, after an exchange of glances, convinced they were doing the right thing (everyone makes mistakes), gave another twist to the handcuffs.

"Ow! Ow! Ow!" cried their victim. At his cries, people came running from every corner of the street and crowded around, blocking the convoy. "He's a criminal," snarled the notary to the people suddenly surrounding him. "He's a thief who was caught red-handed. Make way, in the name of the law!" But Renzo saw his opportunity in the policemen's white, or at least pale faces, and thought, "If I don't make my move now, I'll only have myself to blame." He started to holler: "Boys, they're dragging me off to prison for shouting 'bread and justice' yesterday. I didn't do anything. I'm an honest man. Help me! Don't abandon me, boys!"

The crowd murmured in his favor and calls arose to protect him. At first the policemen ordered, then they asked, then they begged the people nearby to get out of the way and leave. The crowd responded by pushing and shoving even more. Seeing the situation take a turn for the worse, the police let go of the handcuffs and focused only on getting lost in the crowd and sneaking away unobserved. The notary longed to do the same, but was prevented by his beloved black toga. The poor man, pale and alarmed, tried to make himself as small as possible, twisting and turning to wriggle his way through the crowd, but he couldn't look up without seeing twenty other sets of eyes looking down on him. He attempted to pass himself off as a foreigner who, happening upon the scene by chance, had gotten inadvertently caught in the crowd, frozen like a wisp of straw in ice. Finding himself in front of a man who was staring straight at him with a scowl even worse than all the others, the no-

tary twisted his mouth into a smile and, playing the fool, asked, "What happened?"

"A black toga!" the man answered. "Black toga! Black toga!" echoed from every side. The shouts were followed by shoves and, in no time, propelled in part by his own legs, in part by the elbows of others, he managed to attain what he wanted most in that moment: to be away from that stampede.

Chapter 16

"Run, good man, run. There's the monastery, here's the church, over here, over there," shouted the passersby at Renzo from every corner. Run? He hardly needed to be told. From the moment that glimmer of hope appeared, he had been making calculations and decided, if he managed to escape the policemen's clutches, to keep going without stopping until he was well beyond both the city and the state of Milan. "They've got my name in their damn books," he thought, "it doesn't matter anymore how they got it. With my first and last name, they can come and nab me whenever they want." What about sanctuary? He wouldn't go seeking it until the police were well behind him. "Why be a bird in a cage, when I can be a bird in the wild." So he decided that his refuge would be the village near Bergamo where his cousin, Bortolo, lived (if you remember, he had invited Renzo to move there several times). But finding the way, there was the rub. Left to his own devices in a strange part of a strange city, Renzo had no idea which city gate led to Bergamo. Even if he had, he still wouldn't have known how to get there. He was about to ask directions from one of his rescuers, but in the half second available to reflect on his situation, he remembered the much-obliging swordsmith, father of four, from the night before. So to be on the safe side, he decided not to reveal his designs to the crowd, in case it held another man of that ilk, and focused instead on getting away from there as fast as possible. He'd ask directions someplace where no one knew who he was or why he was asking. "Thanks, boys," he told his rescuers, "God bless you." Then, making his way through a space that had immediately opened up for

him, he set off at a run, down an alley, up a street, racing for a stretch without knowing quite where he was going to. When he felt far enough away, he slowed his pace to avoid raising suspicions and started to look around for a person he could ask, someone with a face that inspired trust. But this, too, was a tricky matter. The question itself was suspicious. Time was running out. The police, as soon as they had gotten over their little setback, would set off on the trail of the fugitive. Word of his escape might have already reached this corner of the city. And in these dire straits, Renzo had to scrutinize about a dozen faces before he could find one that was reassuring. There was the portly gentleman standing in his shop doorway, legs spread wide, hands behind his back, belly out, chin up, and a fat wattle draped below it. Seeming to have nothing better to do, he alternated between raising his tremulous mass on tiptoe and rocking back on his heels. But he had the appearance of a nosy windbag who, rather than give an answer, would have only asked more questions. A man coming toward Renzo, eyes staring straight ahead and lips in a pout, seemed to barely know his own way, much less be able to offer quick and correct directions to a stranger. The overgrown boy who looked smart, but also mischievous; he would have probably gotten a kick out of sending a poor peasant in the wrong direction. Indeed, for a man in trouble, everything turns into a new source of trouble! Finally, catching sight of a man walking quickly, Renzo was willing to bet that someone with a pressing engagement would answer immediately, without a lot of small talk. As he came near, Renzo could overhear him talking to himself, and he sounded like an honest man. He approached the stranger and asked, "Excuse me, sir. Which way do I go for Bergamo?"

"For Bergamo? Porta Orientale."

"Thank you. And to get to Porta Orientale?"

"Take this street here to the left. It'll bring you to Piazza Duomo, and then . . ."

"That'll do, sir. I know the rest of the way from there. God bless you." Having been set straight, he started off in the direction

pointed out to him. The man watched him for a minute, and putting together that question with his haste, said to himself, "Either he did something wrong, or someone wants to do him wrong."

Renzo arrives in Piazza del Duomo. As he crosses it, he passes a pile of ashes and spent coals, and recognizes the remains of the bonfire he witnessed the day before. He walks by the steps to the Duomo and sees the Forno delle Grucce again, half demolished and guarded by soldiers. And he goes straight down the road from which he had come with the mob. He reaches the Capuchin monastery. He casts a glance at the piazza and the door to the church, and says to himself, sighing, "I should have listened to what the friar told me yesterday: 'Stay in church, wait, and do a good deed.'"

Here he stopped for a moment to carefully study the gate through which he had to pass. From the distance he could see that it was heavily guarded. Given the circumstances, and his overheated imagination (you have to sympathize: He had his reasons, after all), he was reluctant to attempt to cross. Now he found himself close by a place where he could ask for sanctuary and, with that letter, he would be welcomed in. He felt a strong temptation to enter, but he immediately summoned his courage and thought, "I should be like a bird in the wild, for as long as I can. No one's heard of me. The police have enough on their hands. It's not like they're waiting for me at every gate." He turned around to see if anyone was coming from behind. He saw neither the police nor anyone else who appeared to be looking for him. He continued on, slowing the pace of his damn legs, which always wanted to run when it was more advisable to walk. In this way, slowly but surely, whistling softly all the while, he arrived at the gate.

A group of customs officers were gathered at the crossing point in addition to some Spanish musketeers, as reinforcement. But their attention was directed outside of the city, to prevent the entry of anyone who, at the news of the rioting, might flock to the scene like crows to an abandoned battlefield. So Renzo, with a carefree air, his eyes lowered, and going at a pace suited for either a long journey or

a short stroll, was able to leave the city without being noticed. But his heart was pounding. Spotting a lane to the right, he veered off to avoid the main road, and walked for a stretch before daring to turn around.

He walked and walked, passing farmsteads and villages, continuing on without stopping to ask their names. He knew he was getting farther from Milan and hoped he was headed toward Bergamo. For the moment, that was enough. Every so often he would look back. Every so often he would stare down at and rub first one wrist and then the other. They were still sore, covered with crimson bruises left by the handcuffs. His thoughts, as you can imagine, were a jumble of regrets and anxiety, rage and tenderness. He struggled to piece together the things said and done the night before, to identify the missing pieces of his awful experience, wondering in particular how they had learned his name. His suspicions fell naturally on the swordsmith, to whom he clearly remembered having blurted it out. Thinking back on the way it had been extracted from his mouth, and on the stranger's overall demeanor, the courtesies that always seemed to be asking for something, his suspicions became almost a certainty. Yet he also had a vague recollection of having continued to converse after the swordsmith's departure. But with whom? He could only guess. And about what? His memory, no matter how deeply he searched it, revealed nothing: except that it had been temporarily absent. The poor boy wracked his brain. He was like someone who had signed a stack of blank checks and entrusted them to a man he believed was a model of integrity; after learning that the man was a swindler, he wanted to understand his own predicament. But understand what? All he could see was confusion! At the same time, he struggled to come up with a feasible plan for the future, but all the options were either fanciful or depressing.

Soon, however, the most painful conflict became how he would find his way. After walking what you might call aimlessly, he realized he could not figure out the route on his own. But he was still reluctant to even say "Bergamo," as if the word itself were suspicious or rude, but he could not continue on without naming his

destination. So he decided to do what he had done in Milan, and ask the first passerby with a friendly face, which is what he did.

"You're going the wrong way," the man answered, and after reflecting for a moment, he indicated the route for the main road, using both words and gestures. Renzo thanked him and headed in that direction, pretending to follow the man's instructions. It was his intention, however, to get close to the blessed main road, keep it in sight, and walk parallel to it for as long as he could without setting foot on it. But his plan was easier to conceive than to execute. Eventually, by going right and then left, in a sort of zigzag, partly by following other directions he had found the courage to elicit here and there, partly by adjusting them to his own whims and intentions, and partly by letting the roads themselves guide him, our fugitive had walked about twelve miles, but was still no more than six miles away from Milan. As for Bergamo, he'd be lucky if he wasn't farther away than before. He began to realize that he was getting nowhere fast, so he tried to come up with another solution. He decided to figure out, through subterfuge, the name of a town near the border that could be reached by back roads. Then, by asking for that town, he would find his way, without leaving a trail of questions about Bergamo, which could suggest escape, flight, or criminality.

As he sought a way to elicit this information without raising suspicions, he saw a leafy branch hanging from a solitary house on the outskirts of a village: the symbol of an inn. For some time, he had been feeling a growing need to replenish his energy. He thought it would be just the place to kill two birds with one stone and entered.

The only person there was an old woman with a distaff by her side and a spindle in her hand. He asked for a bite to eat and was offered a little stracchino cheese and some good wine. He accepted the stracchino and declined the wine (which he had come to detest, after the trick it had played on him the night before). And he sat down, asking the woman to be quick. In a minute she had the cheese on the table, and immediately started to pester her guest with questions about himself and the goings-on in Milan, rumors of which

had reached as far as this village. Renzo managed not only to easily deflect her questions, but, taking advantage of this dilemma, turned the old woman's curiosity to his own purposes.

When she asked where he was headed, he replied, "I have to go to a lot of places, and if I find some time to spare, I'd also like to take a moment to stop by that good-size town on the road to Bergamo, the one near the border but still in the Duchy of Milan . . . What's its name again?" He said to himself, "There has to be one."

"You mean Gorgonzola?" asked the old woman.

"Gorgonzola!" Renzo repeated, as if to commit the word to memory. "Is it very far from here?"

"I'm not sure. It must be ten, maybe twelve miles. If one of my sons were here, he could tell you."

"And do you think a person could get there on a nice old country road? It's way too dusty on the main road. It hasn't rained for months!"

"I think so. You can ask in the first village you reach down the road there to the right," and she gave its name.

"Good," said Renzo. He stood up and took a piece of bread that was left from his meager lunch, a bread quite different from the loaf he had found at the foot of the San Dionigi cross the day before. He paid his bill, left, and went straight down the road. To make a long story short, he went from village to village with the name "Gorgonzola" on his lips, and arrived about an hour before nightfall.

While walking, Renzo had already decided to stop in Gorgonzola for a little while, to have a somewhat more substantial meal. His body could have used a bed, too, but he would sooner have let it collapse on the road, exhausted, than surrender to that pleasure. His plan was to find out in town how far it was to the Adda, tease out information about side roads that would take him there, and head in that direction immediately after eating. Having been born and raised at the so-called second source of the river, he had often heard that the Adda formed a border between the states of Milan and Venice. At which point and for how long, he did not know exactly. For the moment, the most urgent question was how to get

across, no matter where. If he didn't succeed that day, he had decided to keep walking as long as the hour and his strength would allow, and then to wait for daybreak, in a field or a wasteland, wherever God pleased, so long as it wasn't an inn.

A few steps into Gorgonzola, he spotted a sign for a tavern. Entering, he asked the host for a bite to eat and a half carafe of wine: The extra miles and late hour had helped him to overcome his extreme, fanatical distaste for it. "Please be quick," he added, "because I need to be on my way again." He said this not only because it was true, but also for fear that the host would imagine he wanted to sleep there, and start up with questions about his first and last name, where he was coming from, and what his business was . . . Beware of all that!

The host replied that the food would be coming right up, and Renzo sat down at the far end of the table, near the door: the bashful corner.

In the room there were a few of the village sluggards who, after discussing and commenting about the events in Milan the day before, were eager to learn a little about what had happened on the present day, too. Especially since the first tidbits were always more likely to arouse curiosity than to satisfy it. An uprising, neither suppressed nor victorious, suspended rather than ended by nightfall, seeming more like the end of an act than the end of the play. One of the men broke away, walked up to the newcomer, and asked whether he was arriving from Milan.

"Who, me?" asked Renzo, caught off guard and trying to buy time before answering.

"Yes, you, if you don't mind the question."

Renzo shook his head, pursed his lips, and made an inarticulate sound. "Milan," he replied, "from what I've heard . . . is no place to go right now, unless you really have to."

"So the rioting is still going on?" asked the busybody, more insistently.

"You'd have to be there to know," said Renzo.

"But aren't you coming from Milan?"

"I'm coming from Liscate," the young man replied quickly, having finally managed to find an answer. Strictly speaking, he actually was coming from there, since he had passed through. He had learned the name from a traveler on the road who had explained that it was the first village he would pass on his way to Gorgonzola.

"Oh!" said the friend, clearly wishing Renzo had come from Milan. Nothing he could do about it, though. "And in Liscate," he continued, "didn't they hear any news from Milan?"

"I wouldn't be surprised if someone did," replied Renzo, "but not me. I didn't hear a thing."

He uttered these words in a particular manner, as if to say, "Enough." The busybody went back to his place and, a moment later, the innkeeper arrived with the food.

"How far is it from here to the Adda?" Renzo mumbled, feigning disinterest, as we've seen him do other times.

"To the Adda? To a crossing?" said the host.

"I mean . . . yes . . . to the Adda."

"Do you want to cross by the Cassano bridge or the Canonica ferry?"

"It doesn't matter . . . I'm only asking out of curiosity."

"What I mean is, since those are the places where honest men cross, people who have nothing to hide."

"I see. So how far is it?"

"Figure that it's about six miles to either place, give or take."

"Six miles! I didn't realize it was so far," said Renzo. "Well, if somebody needed to take a shortcut, are there other places where one could cross?"

"Of course there are," replied the innkeeper, staring into Renzo's face with two eyes brimming with malicious curiosity, and an expression that quashed the other questions the young man was about to ask. Renzo pulled the plate toward himself and, staring at the carafe the host had set down, asked, "Is this an honest wine?"

"As good as gold," said the innkeeper, "anyone from around here will say the same." With that, he returned to the others.

"Damn innkeepers!" exclaimed Renzo to himself. "Each one is

worse than the next." Nonetheless, he settled down to eat with a hearty appetite. At the same time, pretending it didn't concern him, he listened carefully, trying to read the minds of the locals, and discover their thoughts on the great events in which he himself had played no small part. Above all, he wanted to see whether, among them, there might be one honest man whom he could trust enough to ask for directions without fear of being cross-examined and forced to discuss his private affairs.

"Well," said one of them, "this time it looks as if the people of Milan mean business. Anyway, we'll find something out tomorrow, at the latest."

"I wish I'd gone to Milan this morning," said another.

"If you go tomorrow, I'll go, too," said a third, then another, and then another.

"What I want to know," continued the first, "is whether the fine gentlemen of Milan will spare a thought for the poor country folk, or if they'll still go ahead and make laws that are only good for themselves. You know how they are. Uppity city folk. Everything for themselves. And the others? As if they didn't exist!"

"We've got mouths, too. For eating and speaking our minds!" said another, in a voice as modest as his proposal was bold, "And once the ball gets rolling . . ." but he thought better than to finish the sentence.

"Milan isn't the only place where they hoard the grain," began yet another man with a dark, malicious tone. Just then they heard a horse approaching. Everyone ran to the door and, recognizing the new arrival, went out to meet him. He was a merchant from Milan who went to Bergamo several times a year on business, and tended to spend the night at the inn. Since he always found the same company there, he knew everyone, and they crowded around him. One held the bridle, another the stirrup. "Welcome! Welcome!"

"Good to see you!"

"How was your trip?"

"Excellent, and you boys? How are you?"

"Fine, fine. Any news from Milan?"

"Ah, always the same questions," said the merchant as he dismounted, leaving his horse in the care of a stable boy. "And then, and then," he continued, entering the tavern with the group, "at this hour you probably know more than me."

"No, we really don't," said more than one, hands over their hearts.

"Really?" said the merchant. "Then I'll tell you the good . . . and the bad. Hey, innkeeper, do you have my usual bed? Good. A glass of wine, and my usual bite to eat, right away. I want to go to bed early so I can leave early tomorrow morning and reach Bergamo by lunchtime." Settling down across the room from where Renzo sat, silent and attentive, he continued. "You men don't know about all the ruckus yesterday?"

"Yesterday? Yes, we do."

"So you see," the merchant went on, "you do know the latest. I thought as much, since you're always here keeping watch, scrutinizing every passerby . . ."

"But what about today? What happened today?"

"Today? You don't know anything about today?"

"Nothing! No one has come by."

"Let me wet my lips first, and then I'll tell you everything . . ." He filled his glass and raised it in one hand, while with two fingers of the other he curled his mustache and stroked his beard. Then he had a sip and went back to his story. "Today, my dear friends, came close to being as turbulent as yesterday, or worse. I can scarcely believe I'm here chatting with you, since earlier I had set aside any thought of traveling, in order to stay put and guard my poor shop."

"What the devil happened?" asked one of his listeners.

"Devil's the right word: You'll hear just how right." After cutting up the food on his plate, and taking a bite, he went on with his story. His companions, standing around the table, listened with their mouths agape. Renzo, from his corner, while pretending it didn't concern him, paid close attention, more than anyone else, and chewed his last morsels of food very slowly.

"So this morning those same rabble-rousers, the ones who made

such an awful ruckus yesterday, arrived at the appointed places (there was already a secret pact: Everything had been planned). They gathered and started up again with their usual rigamarole, going street to street, crying out to attract more people. You know, it's like when you're sweeping the floor, with all due respect. The more you sweep, the higher the dirt heap. When they felt they had enough people, they headed for the house of the Commissioner of Provision. As if their attacks on him yesterday weren't bad enough! On a gentleman like him! What scoundrels! And the things they said about him! All lies! He's an honest, proper man. Take it from someone who knows. I'm a frequent visitor to his house. I supply him with cloth for his servants' livery. You should have seen the riffraff marching on his house! The faces on them! They passed right in front of my shop! Faces that . . . worse than even the Jews in the paintings of the Stations of the Cross! And the things that came out of their mouths! I'd have plugged my ears except that it didn't seem wise to draw attention to myself. So there they were, marching with every intention of looting. Until . . ." and here, raising his left hand in the air and opening it, he placed the tip of his thumb on the tip of his nose.

"Until?" asked all of his listeners as one.

"Until," the merchant continued, "they found the road blocked with carts and crossbeams, and behind that barricade, a neat row of Spanish musketeers, with their guns arranged to give them the welcome they deserved. When they saw that fine display . . . what would you men have done?"

"Retreat."

"Of course. And that's exactly what they did. But you tell me if it wasn't the devil himself leading the parade. They were on Piazza Cordusio, where they saw the bakery, the same one they'd been wanting to loot since yesterday. And what was happening in that shop? They were busy giving away bread to every customer. Noblemen, plenty of noblemen, were there, too, making sure that everything went smoothly. So in came the riffraff (possessed by the devil, if you ask me, them and the ones egging them on), pouring in like

furies. It was a free-for-all; they grabbed anything that wasn't nailed down, whatever they could lay their hands on. In the blink of an eye everything was upside down: gentlemen, bakers, customers, bread loaves, counter, benches, bins, cupboards, sacks, threshers, wheat bran, flour, dough."

"What about the musketeers?"

"They were busy guarding the Commissioner's house. You can't both sing in the choir and carry the cross. It all happened in the blink of an eye, I tell you. They cleared the place out. Anything worth taking was taken. And then they started up again with that idea from yesterday, of carrying everything left out into the piazza and setting it on fire. The scoundrels had already started throwing stuff outside. Then can you guess the brilliant idea that occurred to the biggest crook of them all?"

"No, tell us."

"To pile everything up inside the shop, and set fire to the pile and to the house with the same match. No sooner said than done."

"Did they set the fire?"

"Wait, there's more. A good soul from the neighborhood had a divine inspiration. He ran upstairs looking for a crucifix. He found one, attached it to the window frame, and from a headboard took two holy candles, lit them, and placed them on the windowsill on either side of the crucifix. The crowd looked up. One thing you can say about the people of Milan, they still have the fear of God in them. Everyone came to their senses. Most everyone, I mean. There were still some devils who'd set fire to heaven itself if they could loot it. But when they saw the crowd turn against them, they had to stop what they were doing and calm down. And guess who should suddenly appear? All the cardinals from the Duomo, in procession, dressed in full canonicals, with the cross raised high. Monsignor Mazenta, the archpriest, started to preach on one side, while Monsignor Settala, the Father Confessor, spoke to the other, and the rest of the cardinals did the same. 'Good people! What has gotten into you? Is this any example to set for your children? Go home! Don't

you realize that bread is cheap again, cheaper than before? Go see for yourselves. There's a bulletin on the corners.'"

"Was it true?"

"Are you kidding? Do you think the monsignors of the Duomo would arrive in *cappa magna* to talk rubbish?"

"So what did the people do?"

"Little by little they left. They ran to the corners where the price was there to see for anyone who could read. Guess how much? An eight-ounce loaf for one *soldo*."

"That's cheap!"

"Indeed. Let's see how long it lasts. Do you have any idea how much flour was wasted between yesterday and this morning? Enough to feed the Duchy for two months!"

"What about outside of Milan? Did they pass any laws for our benefit?"

"What was done in Milan was done at the city's expense. God will have to provide for you. What else can I say? Anyway, the riots are over. But I haven't told you everything. Now comes the good part."

"What else is there?"

"Last night or this morning, there were a lot of arrests. And word got out that the ringleaders would be hanged. As soon as the rumor began to spread, everyone took the fastest road home to avoid being included in their number. By the time I left Milan, it looked like a monastery."

"Will they really hang them?"

"You bet they will. And quickly, too," the merchant replied.

"And the people of the city, what will they do?" asked the same man who had asked the previous question.

"The people? They'll go to watch," said the merchant. "What were they expecting? They were so eager to string up a Christian in the open air, the scoundrels. They thought they would stick it to the Commissioner of Provision? Think again. Instead of him, it's going to be four wretches swaying in the wind, treated to all the formali-

ties, accompanied by the Capuchins and the Happy Death Confraternity.* They deserve it. You see, it's an act of Providence. It had to happen. They were already getting into the habit of entering shops and helping themselves without reaching into their pockets. If we let them get away with bread, the next thing you know it'll be wine, and so on and so forth. Do you think they'd give up such a convenient practice of their own free will? And let me tell you, for an honest man who keeps his shop open, it's not a very comforting thought!"

"You're right," said one of his listeners. "You're right," repeated the others as one.

"And," continued the merchant, patting his beard dry with the napkin, "the plans had been laid well in advance: There was a conspiracy, did you know?"

"A conspiracy!"

"A conspiracy. A plot cooked up by the French court, by that cardinal, you know the one I mean! The man with a Turkish-sounding name, who every day thinks up a new way to disrespect the Spanish Crown. He's set his sights on Milan, since he knows all too well, the smart aleck, that it's the King's stronghold."

"Of course."

"Do you want proof? Who made the most noise yesterday? The foreigners! Faces the likes of which Milan had never seen before. In fact, I forgot to tell you something I heard from a trusted source. The police had nabbed someone at an inn . . ." Renzo, who hadn't missed one syllable of the conversation, felt his blood run cold, and gave a start before he could think to contain himself. No one noticed, however, and the speaker, without interrupting the thread of his story, went on. "They still don't know where he came from, who sent him, or what type of man he is. But he was definitely one of the

* The Bona Mors, or "Happy Death," Confraternity was a lay association founded by the Jesuits that sought to prepare its members to die in peace with God through a life of dedication to Christ and to the Virgin Mary.

ringleaders. Well, yesterday, at the peak of the uproar, he was raising hell. And then, as if that wasn't enough, he started making speeches, and proposing—how kind of him!—to kill all the nobles. The scoundrel! How could the poor survive if all the nobles were killed? The police, who'd been keeping an eye on him, arrested him. They found a bundle of letters on him, and were dragging him off to jail, when what should happen but his partners, who'd surrounded the tavern, came running in great numbers and freed the bloody murderer!"

"And what happened to him?"

"Who knows? He's either fled Milan or is still in hiding. People like that have neither a house nor a roof, but they still find places everywhere to take cover and hole up. Sooner or later, though, even the devil's luck runs out. They end up behind bars when they least expect it. Because when the pear is ripe, it has to fall. For now, what we know for certain is that his letters are in the hands of the police, and they describe the whole plot, and the rumor is that many people are caught up in it. Serves them right. They ransacked half of Milan and were ready to do even worse. They say that the bakers are crooks. I agree. But they should only be hanged after a proper trial. Wheat is being hoarded. We all know that. But it's up to our rulers to have a good network of informants, find the stockpiles, and string up the hoarders alongside the bakers. And if our rulers do nothing about it, then it's up to the city to petition the Crown, and if the first petition is turned down, then petition it again and again. Because if you insist, you will eventually win, but you can't let the criminal habit take root of walking into shops and warehouses and taking whatever you want with impunity."

The little that Renzo had eaten stuck in his throat. He felt as if a thousand years had elapsed since he'd been outside and far away from that inn and that village. More than ten times he must have repeated to himself, "Get going, get going!" But his fear of arousing suspicion, which had grown by leaps and bounds and tyrannized his every thought, kept him nailed to his seat. In his panic, he knew

that sooner or later this windbag would have to stop talking, so he decided that he would get moving as soon as he heard the conversation shift to another subject.

"That's why I stayed home," said one member of the group. "I know how these things turn out, and know that a riot is no place for an honest man, so I didn't let curiosity get the better of me."

"What about me? Did you see me budge?" said another.

"And me?" added a third. "If I'd found myself in Milan by chance, I'd have dropped everything and gone straight back home. I've got a wife and children. Not to mention that I don't much care for all the noise to be honest."

Just then, the innkeeper, who had also been listening, went to the other end of the table, to see how the stranger was doing. Renzo took the opportunity to gesture to him and ask for the bill. He paid it without haggling, although his funds were dwindling. And then, without another word, he went straight to the door, crossed the threshold, and with Providence as his guide, set off in the opposite direction from which he had come.

Chapter 17

Sometimes, all it takes is a single urge to deny a man a moment's peace. So imagine two at once, and in competition with each other. For hours, poor Renzo had been driven by the urge to run and the urge to hide. The merchant's cursed words had abruptly increased both one and the other. So his adventure had created an uproar. So they wanted him at all costs. Who knew how many police were out trying to track him down? Or what orders had been issued to search the towns, the taverns, the roads? He realized that ultimately there were only two policemen who could identify him, and his name was hardly written on his forehead. But he also remembered stories he had heard of fugitives who had been detected and captured through strange combinations: betrayed by their gait, their suspicious air, or other telltale clues. He was unnerved by it all.

As he left Gorgonzola, the clock was striking five and the shadows were lengthening, making the dangers of being spotted slowly recede. Still, he hesitated to take the main road, preferring the first side road that seemed to lead to his destination. At first, he ran into an occasional wayfarer, but with his imagination prey to such terrible fears, he didn't dare to approach anyone to ask for directions. "The man said six miles, he did," Renzo thought to himself, "if going off the main road means the miles turn into eight or ten, then my legs will just have to hold up a little longer. They've already carried me this far. I'm certainly not headed toward Milan, so I must be headed toward the Adda. Keep walking and I'll get there sooner or later. The Adda is nice and loud. So when I'm close, I won't need anyone to show me the route. And if I find a boat that'll

take me, I can cross right away. Otherwise I'll wait till morning, in the middle of a field, in a tree, like a sparrow. Better to sleep in a tree than in prison."

He soon came upon a narrow road on the left, and he took it. If he had run into someone at that hour, he would no longer have been reluctant to ask directions, but he didn't see or hear a living soul. So he followed wherever the road might lead, thinking to himself:

"Me? Raise hell? Me, kill all those gentlemen? I'd give my eye teeth to find myself face-to-face with that merchant on the other side of the Adda (whenever I do finally cross that blessed river!). I'd stop him and ask, by the way, sir, where did you dig up those little stories? Let me tell you, my dear sir, what really happened. The only hell I raised was to help Ferrer as if he were my brother. And those scoundrels who, according to you, were my friends? They wanted to trick me because, for a second, I put in a word as a good Christian. While you were guarding your shop, I was getting my ribs crushed to save his Lordship, the Commissioner of Provision, whom I've never seen or met. I'll think twice before helping out a nobleman again. I know, I know. They're still our fellow man, and we should lend a hand out of the goodness of our hearts. Oh, and that big bundle of letters describing the whole plot, which—as I'm sure you know—is now in the hands of the law? Want to bet I can show it to you right now, without the devil's help? Curious? Well, here it is . . . Only one letter, you say? . . . Yes, sir, only one letter. And this letter, if you must know, was written by a priest who could teach you a thing or two about the Catechism. One hair of his chin is worth more than your whole beard, no offense. And this letter was written, as you can see, to another priest, a man like him . . . Now you know the criminals I associate with. So watch what you say next time, especially about your fellow man."

After a while, these and similar thoughts ceased, and the poor pilgrim dwelled solely on his present circumstances. The fear of being followed or found out that had burdened his trip during the day no longer bothered him. But so many other things made it even more unpleasant! The darkness, the solitude, his growing and now

aching exhaustion. A quiet breeze was blowing, steady and sharp, that was cold comfort to a man wearing the same clothes he had donned to get married around the corner, thinking he would soon be coming home in triumph. And everything was made worse by having to wander aimlessly, like a blind man, so to speak, looking for a safe place to rest.

Whenever he passed through a village, he would walk very slowly, looking around to see if any doors were still open. But he never saw a sign of life, except for the occasional flicker of candlelight through the shutters. At times he would stop on the road beyond the settlements and listen in vain for the blessed voice of the Adda. But the only voices he heard were the whimpering of dogs floating on the air, both plaintive and menacing, from some isolated farmhouse. As he approached, the whimpering became a rapid, angry barking. When he passed by the door he could hear and almost see the beast, its nose against the crack in the door, howling even louder, which quelled any temptation to knock and ask for shelter. Even without the dogs. "Who's there?" he imagined people saying, "What do you want at this hour? How did you get here? Tell us who you are. Couldn't you stay at an inn?" "If I knock, that's the greeting I'll get—if I'm lucky!" he said to himself. "Either that or a fearful soul who can't sleep and, to make matters worse, will start screaming, 'Help! Thief!' I'd better have an answer good and ready. But what could I answer? The first thing that comes to mind when you hear a sound in the night are thieves, criminals, tricks: You never stop to think that an honest man might find himself on the road, unless he's a gentleman in a carriage." So he decided against knocking on doors as a last resort, and continued on, hoping to at least find the Adda, if not cross it, that same night. Otherwise, he would have to resume his search in broad daylight.

On and on he went, coming to where the cultivated fields ended and untilled land began, with patches of fern and broom. He sensed, if not a sign then at least a suggestion of a river nearby, and he headed in that direction, along a path that cut through the fields. Every few steps he would stop to listen, but always in vain. As the

vegetation grew wilder his journey became more unnerving. He could no longer see a mulberry bush, a vine, or any other signs of human cultivation, which earlier had kept him a kind of company. Still he pressed on. Every time he started to remember frightening images and apparitions from tales told to him as a child, he banished or quieted them by saying prayers for the souls of the dead.

With each step the trail became more overgrown with hawthorn, scrub oak, and brambles. Quickening his step, with more impatience than desire, he began to spot the occasional tree amid the brush. Farther along the same trail, he realized he was entering a forest, and shuddered at the thought of venturing in. But he overcame his qualms and continued on, reluctantly. The deeper in he went, the more his dread grew, and the more everything repelled him. The trees in the distance looked like strange, twisted monsters. He was unnerved by the shadows cast by the swaying treetops, which quivered on the trail between patches of moonlight. Even the rustling of leaves underfoot was unbearable. His legs were gripped by a fury, an urge to run while at the same time struggling to support his body. He felt the night air blowing more harshly and cruelly against his brow and cheeks, slipping between his clothes and his skin, rippling through them, penetrating more deeply into his already weary bones and depleting his last ounce of strength.

All at once that dread, the undefined horror that his spirit had been fighting for hours seemed to overwhelm him. He was on the verge of losing his mind, but frightened most of all by his own fear. He mustered his former courage and commanded it to resist. His composure briefly restored, he paused for a moment of reflection. He resolved to get out of there immediately, retrace his steps, and go straight back to the last village he had passed, return to the company of men, and seek shelter, even at the tavern.

As he stood still, no longer crushing the leaves underfoot, everything around him fell silent. He started to hear a sound, a murmuring, the murmuring of running water. He listened more carefully. There was no mistaking it. "It's the Adda!" he exclaimed. It was like finding a long-lost friend, a brother, a savior. His exhaustion almost

disappeared. His pulse returned: He could feel the blood flowing through his veins, free and warm, his thoughts becoming more confident, and the uncertainty and gravity of things largely evaporate. He did not hesitate to venture deeper into the forest, in pursuit of that friendly sound.

In a few moments he reached the far end of the forest, on the edge of a deep riverbank. Looking down through the dense underbrush, he could see the water sparkling and flowing. Looking up, he saw a vast plain on the opposite bank, dotted with towns, and beyond them the hills, and on one of them, a large white patch that had to be a city: Bergamo, no doubt. He descended the bank a short ways, separating and pushing aside the brambles with his hands and his arms, and looked around for a boat moving on the river. He listened for oars slicing the water, but he did not see or hear a thing. Had it been a less powerful river, Renzo would have immediately gone down and tried to wade across, but he knew all too well that the Adda was not to be trusted.

So he calmly pondered what decision to take. To climb a tree and wait six or more hours for dawn, so thinly dressed, with the wind, the cold, would freeze him to the bone. To pace up and down the whole time would do little against the harsh open air and demand too much from his poor overworked legs. He remembered seeing a thatched hut, built from tree trunks and branches, then plastered with mud, in one of the fields closest to the untilled farmland. The peasants in the Milanese countryside used to store their crops in these huts during summer and take shelter in them at night to keep watch. For the rest of the year they were empty. He immediately settled on this as his refuge. He retraced his steps, went back through the forest, the undergrowth, and the untilled farmland, and headed for the hut. A dilapidated, worm-eaten door was ajar, neither locked nor chained. Renzo opened it and went in. He saw a wicker mat hanging in the air like a hammock, tied to the walls by braided saplings, but he didn't bother getting into it. On the ground he saw some straw and thought it would be good enough for his tired bones.

Before lying down on the bed that Providence had prepared, however, he dropped to his knees to give thanks for the blessings and for all the help he had received from God on that awful day. He said his usual prayers and then asked God's forgiveness for not saying them the night before, or as he put it, for going to bed like a dog. "And that is why," he added to himself, placing his hands against the straw and prostrating himself on the ground, "I got such a rude awakening this morning." He gathered all the straw that was strewn about, piled it on top of himself as a kind of blanket to repel the bitter cold, which had penetrated the hut, and huddled underneath, eager for a deep sleep, while feeling that he had paid too high a price for it.

Scarcely had he closed his eyes, however, when he began to remember or imagine (which of the two I can't say), a coming and going of people, so dense, so incessant, that any hope of sleep disappeared. The merchant, the notary, the police, the swordsmith, the innkeeper, Ferrer, the Commissioner, the gang at the inn, the mob on the street, then Don Abbondio, then Don Rodrigo: anyone and everyone to whom Renzo wanted to speak his mind.

Only three images appeared to him unaccompanied by bitter memories, free of anxiety, and completely benign. Two in particular, quite different to be sure, but closely connected in the young man's heart: a black braid and a white beard. Yet not even the consolation he felt in pondering them was pure and untroubled. Thoughts of Padre Cristoforo made him feel deeply ashamed of his escapades, sinful intemperance, and the fine use he had made of the good friar's fatherly advice. And his thoughts of Lucia? We won't even try to describe how he felt. The reader knows the circumstances, and can imagine for him- or herself. And poor Agnese, how could he forget her? Agnese, who already considered him the spouse of her only child? Even before he could call her "Mother" she had welcomed him into her language and her heart, and demonstrated her affection through her deeds. Worse still was the realization that it was because of these loving attentions, the great fondness she felt for him, that the poor woman now found herself

homeless, almost a vagrant, uncertain of the future, and suffering trials and tribulations from the very thing she had hoped would be the peace and joy of her final years.

What a night for poor Renzo! On what was supposed to have been the fifth night of marriage! In such a room! In such a wedding bed! At the end of such a day! Without knowing what tomorrow, and the days to follow, would bring!

"God's will be done," was his answer to the most distressing thoughts. "God's will be done. He has a plan. He is thinking of us, too. This is atonement for my sins. Lucia is so good! God cannot want her to suffer more and more and more!"

Lost in these thoughts, and despairing that sleep would ever arrive, the bitter cold forced him to shiver and shake every now and then. He yearned for daybreak, and impatiently counted the slow passing of the hours. Counted, I say, because every half hour, in the vast silence, he could hear the tolling of a clock striking the hour: I imagine it was the clock in Trezzo. The first time that sound was inflicted on his ears, so unexpectedly, from nowhere, it rang ominously, like a warning in an unknown voice from a person unseen.

When the hammer finally struck eleven times, to mark five o'clock in the morning, the hour Renzo had chosen to rise, he roused himself, half-frozen, knelt down, and said his morning prayers with special fervor. He stood up, stretched high and wide, and shook his hips and his shoulders as if to reconnect his limbs, each of which seemed to have a will of its own. He blew on one hand, then the other, rubbed them together, and opened the door of the hut. Before venturing out, he glanced to the right and the left to see if anyone was around. Finding no one, he looked for the trail from the night before. He spotted it immediately and started off in that direction.

The sky promised a beautiful day ahead. Off in a corner, the moon, pale and dim, stood out against an immense gray-blue field that faded slowly to pink and gold farther over to the east. Farther down, on the horizon, a few clouds stretched out in long uneven layers, ranging from blue to brown, the lowest one with a strip of fire along

the bottom that slowly became sharper and more vivid. Looking southward, he could see other clouds rolled together, soft and light, glowing in a thousand nameless colors: the sky above Lombardy, so beautiful when it's beautiful, so splendid, so serene.

If Renzo had been out for a stroll, he would certainly have gazed at and admired the dawn, which was so different from what he was used to seeing from his own mountains. But he kept to the path and walked in long strides, to warm up and to get to the river quickly. He crossed the fields, the untilled farmland, the brush. He passed through the woods, looking around, laughing and embarrassed at his panic of a few hours earlier. He reached the top of the riverbank and looked down.

Between the branches he spotted a fisherman's boat moving slowly, against the current, and brushing against the banks. He immediately raced down the shortest path, cutting through the brambles, and reached the shore. He called out to the fisherman in a soft low voice. Pretending to ask for a small favor while unconsciously adopting an almost pleading manner, he gestured to the man to come near. The fisherman surveyed the river, gave a long and cautious look upstream, turned to see what was happening downstream, and then steered the prow toward Renzo and bumped against the riverbank. Renzo, who was standing there with one foot almost in the water, grabbed hold of the prow, jumped inside the boat, and said, "Would you do me the favor of taking me to the other side? I'll pay you." The fisherman had guessed what he wanted and was already rowing in that direction. Renzo, noticing an oar on the floor of the boat, bent down and grabbed hold of it.

"Easy there," said the owner, but when he saw how deftly the young man handled it, he said, "ah, so you're one of us?"

"You could say that," replied Renzo, and he started to row with the strength and skill of an old hand. Every now and then, without pausing, he would glance suspiciously at the receding bank and impatiently at the one approaching, frustrated that there was no shorter route. The river was too strong at that point for a direct

crossing, so the boat had to move diagonally, alternately fighting and following the current.

As with every complicated affair, in which everything seems difficult at first, but in the doing turns out to be a matter of only a few details, now that the Adda was almost behind him, Renzo was anxious to know for certain whether it was indeed the border between the two states, or whether, having surpassed that obstacle, yet another remained. So he called to the fisherman and, nodding toward the white spot in the distance he had seen the night before, now appearing more distinct, he asked, "That town over there, is it Bergamo?"

"The city of Bergamo," the fisherman replied.

"And that bank there, is it in the territory of Bergamo?"

"In the land of Saint Mark."*

"Long live Saint Mark!" exclaimed Renzo. The fisherman said nothing.

When they finally touched the other side, Renzo leapt to the riverbank. Thanking God under his breath and the fisherman out loud, he stuck his hand in his pocket and pulled out a berlinga that, given the circumstances, was no small expense. He held it out to the honest man who, taking another glance at the Milanese side, and up and down the river, extended his hand, accepted the gratuity, and pocketed it. He pursed his lips and placed a finger over them, accompanying this gesture with a complicit wink. Then he said, "Safe trip," and started back across.

Lest the reader be surprised at this prompt and discreet courtesy toward a stranger, I hasten to explain that the boatman was often asked to provide a similar service for smugglers and bandits, and was quite accustomed to complying. He did it more to avoid making enemies than for love of the pocket money he might earn. He provided it, I was saying, every time he could be sure that he hadn't

* Saint Mark was the patron saint of the Venetian Republic, which in the seventeenth century extended as far west as Bergamo.

been spotted by customs officers, policemen, or spies. So without preferring one customer to the other, he tried to make everyone happy, with the impartiality that is the innate talent of anyone who is obliged to deal with certain types, while having to account for their actions to certain others.

Renzo stopped for a moment to contemplate the land on the opposite bank, which shortly before had burned beneath his feet. "Ah, it really is behind me," was his first thought. "Stay on your own side, damned country," was his second, a farewell to the homeland. But his third went to the people he was leaving behind. He crossed his arms over his chest, heaved a sigh, lowered his eyes to the water flowing at his feet, and thought, "This same water passed under the bridge," the general name by which the people in his village referred to the Lecco bridge. "Ah, what an evil world! Enough of this. God's will be done."

He turned his back on these sad thoughts and set out, using the white spot on the mountainside as his guiding point until he could find someone to show him the way. You should have seen how easily he approached other wayfarers now, and, without beating around the bush, said the name of the town where his cousin lived. The first person he spoke to told him that he still had nine miles to go.

It was not a pleasant journey. Apart from the burden of his own troubles, heartbreaking sights all along the way saddened him, and he realized that the famine he thought he had left behind would be awaiting him in the country he was entering. At every step, especially in the villages and hamlets, he encountered people who were poor, not by vocation, whose misery showed more in their faces than in their clothes. He saw peasants, hill people, artisans, entire families, and heard a sad droning that was a mix of prayers, laments, and sobs. The sight filled him not only with compassion and melancholy but also with thoughts of his own circumstances.

"Who knows," he wondered, "whether I'll manage to find a good position. Whether there's even work. Let me stop worrying! Bortolo was fond of me. He's a good soul and has made money. He's invited

me to come many times. He won't let me down. And Providence has helped me so far. It will keep on helping me in the future."

In the meantime his appetite had been nagging at him for a while, and was growing with each passing mile. At first Renzo thought he could resist, without much discomfort, for the two or three hours that might remain. On the other hand, he didn't think it would be very polite to appear before his cousin like a beggar, and greet him with the words, "Give me something to eat." He emptied his pockets of his riches, dropped them into one hand, and figured out the sum. It was not a calculation that required much arithmetic, but there was more than enough for a little something to eat. He went to a tavern to set his stomach right, and in fact, once he'd paid, he still had a few coins left.

On his way out, he saw two women slumped on the ground rather than sitting, and so close to the door that he almost tripped over them. One was elderly while the other was younger, with an infant attempting to nurse in vain first on one breast, then on the other, crying and crying. They all had the pallor of death. Standing near them was a man on whose face and limbs you could still detect the signs of his former strength, now depleted and almost spent by months of deprivation. All three held out their hands toward the man with the confident gait and revitalized appearance. No one spoke. Did their begging not speak for itself?

"Here's a gift from Providence!" said Renzo. Digging his hand into his pocket, he emptied it of the few coins he had left, dropped them into the closest hand, and continued on his way.

The meal and his good deed comforted him and lifted his spirits (for we are made of both body and soul). Certainly, being divested of the last of his money had given him more faith in the future than if he had come across ten times that amount. Since Providence had set those starving people by the road that day to inspire a stranger, a fugitive, to give away his last coins, even though he was uncertain of how he would survive himself, then who could believe that it would forsake the instrument of this task, the man to whom it had given such a vivid sense of itself, so effective and resolute?

This is more or less what the young man was thinking, but even less clearly than I have been able to express. For the rest of the way, as he pondered his situation, his musings grew brighter. Sooner or later, the famine had to end. Every year there is a new harvest. In the meantime, he had his trade and his cousin Bortolo. He also had a little money at home that he would send for immediately. And with that, come what may, he would manage to get by, day after day, until the times of plenty returned. "And once they finally have," Renzo continued to imagine, "there will be an abundance of work. The masters will compete for workers from the state of Milan, who are the most skilled. And the workers from Milan will get cocky. Anyone who wants skilled workers will have to pay for them! I'll make enough money for two, with some left over for savings. Then I can dictate a letter to the women, telling them to come . . . And then, why wait? With the little we've saved, weren't we ready to make it through the winter? Well, we can make it through the winter here, too. As for priests, they're everywhere. So let those two dear women come and we'll set up house. What a pleasure it will be to walk down this same road together. To go for a ride in a cart as far as the Adda, and have a picnic there, right on the riverbank, and show the women where I stood looking for a boat, the briars I cut through, where I finally found someone to take me across."

He reaches his cousin's village. Before he sets foot inside, he spots a tall, tall house, with a series of long, long windows. He realizes it's a spinning mill, goes in, and, amid the noise of cascading water and churning wheels, asks in a loud voice whether a certain Bortolo Castagneri works there.

"Signor Bortolo? He's over there."

"They call him *Signore*? That's a good sign," thinks Renzo. He sees his cousin and runs up to him. Bortolo turns around and recognizes the young man who's shouting, "I'm here!" A surprised "Oh!" Arms in the air, and then around each other in a hug. After that initial welcome, Bortolo drags our young man to another room, away from the screeching of the machines and curious eyes, and says, "I'm happy to see you. But you're such a rascal: I've invited

you so many times, and you never wanted to come. Now you've arrived at a rough moment."

"To tell you the truth, I didn't have much choice," explained Renzo, and told him the whole sad story very briefly, but not without great emotion.

"That's a different matter," said Bortolo. "Poor Renzo! You're counting on me. I won't let you down. But I've got to tell you, they're not looking for workers right now. In fact, everyone's trying to hold on to the workers they've got, to avoid losing them and having to shut down. But the boss likes me and he's got work. And let me tell you, between us, no boast, he owes a lot of it to me. He puts in the capital and I put in the little bit of skill I have. I'm the foreman, you know. To tell you the truth, I'm his right-hand man. Oh, but poor Lucia Mondella! I remember her like it was yesterday. A good girl. Always the best behaved in church. And when you passed her cottage . . . I can almost see it, the little cottage, just outside of town, with a beautiful fig tree that was higher than the wall . . ."

"Can we please not talk about it?"

"What I meant to say is that, when you passed that cottage, you could always hear the spinning wheel going, spinning, spinning, spinning. And that Don Rodrigo! He was already going down that road before I left. Now he's the devil incarnate, from what I hear. Until God reins him in. Anyway, as I was saying, people are going hungry here, too . . . Which reminds me, how's your appetite?"

"I ate a little while ago, on the road."

"And how are we doing for money?"

Renzo held a hand up to his mouth and blew on it.

"It doesn't matter," said Bortolo, "I've got some. And don't you worry. Soon enough, once things have changed, God willing, you'll pay me back, and with enough left over for yourself."

"I've got a little something at home that I'll have them send to me."

"Good. In the meantime you can count on me. God has been good to me so I can be good to others. And if not to family and friends, then to who?"

"I knew Providence would look after me!" exclaimed Renzo, shaking his good cousin's hand affectionately.

"So," Bortolo resumed, "what an uproar in Milan. They all sound crazy to me. Word of it reached all the way up here, but you have to tell me the details. Boy, do we have a lot to talk about. Up here, you see, people are calmer and we do things a little more sensibly. The city bought two thousand bushels of grain from a Venetian merchant, grain from Turkey. Yes, from Turkey. You can't be too picky when it comes to food! Wait until you hear what happened next. The governors of Verona and Brescia closed the roads and said, 'We're not letting any grain through!' So what did the people of Bergamo do? They sent a lawyer to Venice. And not just any lawyer: They sent Lorenzo Torre. He went right away, presented himself to the Doge, and said, 'What's gotten into the distinguished governors?' And what a speech he gave! A speech, they say, that was fit to print. That's what it means to have a man who knows how to talk! An order went out immediately to let the grain through. And the governors were told not only to let it through, but to give it an escort, too. And it was on its way. They didn't forget the countryside, either. Giovanbattista Biava (another great man!), the envoy of Bergamo to Venice, let the Senate know that people were starving in the countryside, too, and the Senate ordered them four thousand bushels of millet, which can also be used to make bread. And you know what? If there's no bread, we'll eat meat. God has been good to me, as I was saying. Now I'll take you to my boss: I've mentioned you to him many times, and he'll be happy to meet you. A big-hearted man from Bergamo, in the best tradition. He wasn't expecting you now. But when he hears your story . . . He knows how to treat his workers. The famine will come and go, but business never stops. But first, I have to warn you about something. Do you know what they call us folks from the Duchy of Milan around here?"

"No, what?"

"They call us *baggiani,* blockheads."

"That's not very nice of them."

"It is what it is. Anyone born in the Milan area who wants to live

around here had better get used to it. For them, calling a Milanese a blockhead is like saying, 'sir,' to a nobleman."

"I'll bet they only say it to people that let them."

"My boy, if you can't take being called a blockhead, you'd better not count on living here. You'd have to keep your hand on your dagger all the time. And let's suppose you were able to kill two or three or four, someone would then come along to kill you, too—can you imagine what a pleasure it would be to appear on Judgment Day with the stain of three or four murders on your soul?"

"What about a Milanese who has a little . . ." He tapped his finger on his forehead, as he had at the Luna Piena tavern. "What I mean to say is, someone who's a skilled craftsman?"

"It's all the same. He'd still be called a blockhead. Do you know what my boss says when he talks about me with his friends? He says, 'That blockhead was a godsend for my business. If I didn't have that blockhead, I'd be in big trouble.' It's their custom."

"Then it's a stupid custom. And seeing what we know how to do (after all, we're the ones who brought the art here, and we're the ones who keep it going), how come it hasn't changed?"

"So far it hasn't. Maybe with time. Maybe with the next generation. But there's no cure for the grown-ups. They've picked up the habit and now they aren't going to change. What does it matter in the end? Nothing compared to the courtesies our dear compatriots paid to you, not to mention the ones they had in store."

"You're right. Well, if that's the worst of it . . ."

"Now that you've been warned, everything will go smoothly. Come see the boss. Chin up."

And, in fact, everything did go well, as Bortolo had promised, so there's no need for a detailed report of what happened. And it truly was Providence, because we are about to see how hard it would be for Renzo to get back the belongings and the money he had left at home.

Chapter 18

On that same day, the thirteenth of November, a messenger arrived to present the Mayor of Lecco with orders from Milan's chief of police to conduct every investigation possible and necessary to determine whether a certain youth by the name of Lorenzo Tramaglino, silk-worker, who had escaped from the forces of *praedicti egregii domini capitanei* (the aforementioned Honorable Signor Capitano), had returned openly or clandestinely to his *ignotum* town, but *verum in territorio Leuci* (definitely in the territory of Lecco). Once these facts had been ascertained, the Mayor should attempt *quanta maxima diligentia* to capture and duly restrain him: with a good pair of metal handcuffs, given the proven insufficiency of twine restraints for said subject. He should then be escorted to prison, and kept there, under lock and key, until he can be handed over to the officers sent to take him away. And regardless of whether or not he is captured, thou shalt go to the domicile of Laurenti Tramaliini and *facta debita diligentia,* confiscate everything related to the case, and gather information of his depraved character, his life, and his accomplices. And all that has been said or done, found or not found, confiscated or left in place, shall be diligently reported.

The Mayor, having done everything humanly possible to ascertain that the subject had not returned, summoned the village Consul, and asked to be taken to the house indicated, with a large entourage of notaries and policemen. The house was locked. The person who had the keys could not or would not be found. So the door was broken in and a diligent search was conducted: In other words, the house was ransacked like a city under siege.

Word of the investigation spread through the area immediately, reaching the ears of Padre Cristoforo. As shocked as he was pained, he made inquiries to shed some light on the reasons for such a surprising turn of events, but all he could gather were fanciful conjectures. He immediately wrote to Padre Bonaventura, from whom he hoped to receive more accurate information. In the meantime, Renzo's friends and relatives were summoned to give depositions of what they might know about his *depraved character.* The name "Tramaglino" was now a curse, a shame, a crime. The town was turned upside down. Little by little, it was learned that in the heart of Milan Renzo had escaped from the police, and disappeared. The rumor circulated that he had done something terrible, but either no one could say exactly what it was, or they gave a hundred different versions. The worse it was purported to be, the less it was believed by the people in the village, who knew Renzo to be a good boy. Most people assumed, and whispered among themselves, that it was a plot cooked up by that tyrant Don Rodrigo to destroy his poor rival. Which goes to show that, to judge someone by inference, without the necessary knowledge of the facts, can sometimes do a great wrong, even to a scoundrel.

What we can assert with the facts in hand, as the saying goes, is that while Don Rodrigo played no part in Renzo's misfortune, he couldn't have been happier than if he had arranged it himself. He boasted of it to his inner circle, especially Count Attilio. The Count would have already been in Milan by now, had he kept to his original plan, but at the first news of the riots, and of the mob roaming the streets, he thought it best to remain in the countryside until calm was restored, since he was in no mood for a thrashing. Especially since, having offended so many people, he had good reason to fear that some of the many—who had been restrained only by their powerlessness—would be emboldened by the circumstances to decide that the time had come for collective revenge.

His respite did not last long. The warrant for Renzo's arrest from Milan already indicated that things were calming down in the city. When that indication became a certainty, Count Attilio left for the

city immediately, urging his cousin to persist in his campaign and achieve his goal, while promising, for his part, to handle the friar. On that front, his despised rival's unlucky circumstances would play into his scheme perfectly.

Shortly after Count Attilio left, Griso arrived from Monza, safe and sound, and reported to his master all the news he had managed to gather. Lucia had taken refuge in a certain convent, under the protection of a certain Signora. The girl was always cloistered, as if she, too, were a nun, never setting foot outside the door, and attending church services from behind the iron grille of a small window. This circumstance disappointed many of the townspeople, for having heard rumors of her adventures, and great things about her appearance, they longed to catch a glimpse of her for themselves.

This same report put the devil in Don Rodrigo, or rather, aggravated the devil that already possessed him. With so many circumstances favorable to his design, his passion—or that combination of obstinacy, rage, and capricious lust that constituted his passion—became even more inflamed. Now that Renzo was gone, driven out, a fugitive, anything could be done to him with full legitimacy. Even his bride, in a way, could be considered fair game. The only man in the world who would and could take Renzo's side, and in a voice loud enough to be heard from afar by the highest personages—the angry friar—would shortly be rendered harmless, in all probability. And now, lo and behold, a new obstacle did not only threaten to offset these advantages, but you could say it actually annulled them. A convent in Monza—even if a princess hadn't resided there—was too hard a nut for Don Rodrigo to crack. No matter how much his imagination might hover over that refuge, he could not envision any rhyme or reason that would remove Lucia from there, whether by force or trickery.

He was on the verge of giving up on his ambition. He was ready to set out for Milan—taking the long way to avoid passing through Monza—where he could surround himself with friends and festivities that would expel, through joyful thoughts, the failure that

had now become so agonizing. But wait: his friends? Slow down. Rather than distraction, new displeasures might await him in their company, since Attilio would probably have already blurted out the story, and raised everyone's expectations. Questions about the girl from the mountains would come at him from every corner, and he would have to explain that he had failed. With all his desires, all his efforts, what did he gain in the end? He had made a resolution: An unworthy resolution, to be sure, but come now, you can't always control your desires. The point is to satisfy them. And what had the result been? That a peasant and a friar had gotten the better of him? Impossible! And when an unexpected stroke of luck—without any effort on the part of his own no-good self—had removed the peasant from the scene, and a cunning friend had taken care of the friar, he hadn't known how to take advantage of the situation, and instead beaten a cowardly retreat. More than enough reason to never again be able to hold his head high among his peers, or be forced to stand forever ready to draw his sword. And then, how could he return to live in that village, in that country, where, apart from the painful, incessant reminders of his passion, he would bear the scar of failure? Public opprobrium of him would rise while his status would sink. On the face of every lowlife, amid their bowing and scraping, he would be able to read a bitter, "Finally got a taste of your own medicine."

"The road to iniquity," says the manuscript at this point, "is wide but that does not mean it is easy. There are many bumps and rough patches along the way, and though the road goes downhill, it is arduous and tiring."

Don Rodrigo didn't want to get off the road, or go back, or stop, and he couldn't move forward on his own. He did, however, hit upon a means through which he could press on: He could request the intercession of someone whose hands often reached where the eyesight of others could not. A man or devil for whom the harder the task, the more eager he was to take it on. But this option also had its drawbacks and its risks, which were even more serious than

expected, since no one could predict where Don Rodrigo might end up once he had thrown in his lot with that man: a powerful ally, no doubt, but a tyrannical and dangerous commander.

For days these thoughts kept Don Rodrigo hanging between a yes and a no, each of which was equally troubling. A letter arrived from his cousin in the meantime, saying that the plot was well underway. Shortly after the lightning came thunder. That is to say, one fine morning, he heard that Padre Cristoforo had been transferred from the Pescarenico monastery. This quick success, described in the letter from Attilio that both encouraged him and threatened him with ridicule, made Don Rodrigo more inclined to take the gamble. The final push came from the unexpected news that Agnese had returned home: one less impediment to Lucia. I will explain these two events, starting with the second.

The two poor women had barely settled into their refuge when the news spread in Monza, and then in the convent, of the rioting in Milan. Then came a flood of details that was forever swelling and changing. The stewardess who, from her home, could keep one ear on the street and one on the convent, gathered news from both sources, and shared it with her guests.

"Two, six, eight, four, seven men were thrown into prison. They'll string them up, some in front of the Forno delle Grucce, some at the top of the road to the Commissioner of Provision's house . . . And guess what? One of them got away! He's from Lecco, or thereabouts. I didn't catch his name, but I'm sure someone will come by and tell me. I wonder if you know him."

This announcement, together with the knowledge that Renzo had arrived in Milan on that fateful day, left the women, especially Lucia, more than a little worried. So imagine how they felt when the custodian came back to tell them, "He's from your same town, the man that got away before they could hang him. A silk-worker named Tramaglino: Do you know him?"

Lucia dropped the embroidery from her hands. She turned pale and lost her composure. The stewardess would certainly have noticed if she had been any closer, but she was standing in the door-

way with Agnese. Lucia's mother was also shaken, though not as much, and she was able to hide her reaction. By way of a reply, she said that in a small town everyone knows everyone else, so of course they knew him, but they couldn't believe he could be mixed up in anything like that, since he was such a gentle soul. She then asked whether he really had escaped, and to where.

"Escaped? Everyone says so. To where? Who knows? Maybe they'll nab him again, maybe he's safe. But if they do get their hands on him again, your gentle soul . . ."

At this the stewardess was thankfully called away. You can imagine how the mother and daughter felt. For the next few days, the poor woman and her desolate girl had to live with uncertainty, mulling over the how, the why, and the consequences of this heartbreaking news, and pondering, each to herself, or whispering to the other whenever they could, the awful words they had heard.

Finally, on Thursday, a man came to the convent asking for Agnese. He was a fisherman from Pescarenico on his way to Milan to sell his catch, per his customary practice. When he passed through Monza, he had been asked by the good Fra Cristoforo to stop by the convent and give his regards to the women, tell them what was known about Renzo's unfortunate situation, and advise them to be patient and trust in God. He was also to assure them that the friar would never forget them, and that he would look for every opportunity to help. In the meantime he would not fail to keep them apprised of the situation once a week, through the fisherman or another means. The messenger had nothing new or concrete to report about Renzo, other than the visit to his house and the hunt to capture him. Every attempt had turned up empty, and it was known for certain that he had taken refuge in the Bergamo area. Needless to say, this came as a great relief to Lucia. Her tears began to flow more freely. She found even more comfort in her private emotional outpourings with her mother, and to all of her prayers she added words of thanks.

Gertrude often invited Lucia to her private parlor, and sometimes kept her there for hours on end, enjoying the poor girl's

sweetness and innocence, as well as her constant words of appreciation and gratitude. She also confided in Lucia a part of her own story (the untainted part), and what she had suffered before coming to this place of suffering. Thus the dismay and suspicion that Lucia had initially felt toward Gertrude slowly turned into compassion. The story—aided by Agnese's notions about the minds of the nobility—gave Lucia more than enough to explain the odd manners of her benefactress. Although she felt inclined to reciprocate the confidences that Gertrude had shared with her, she avoided mentioning her own latest concern, her latest misfortune, and telling her who the fugitive silk-worker was, to avoid spreading such painful and scandalous news. She also warded off, as best she could, the nun's prying questions about her life before her engagement. This was not out of caution, but rather because it was a story more agonizing, more difficult to tell than all the ones she'd heard from the Signora (and even the ones still to come). The nun's stories were filled with cruelty, scheming, and suffering: things that were awful and painful but could still be named. Lucia's stories, by contrast, contained a sentiment, a word that she didn't feel she could utter when speaking about herself. A word she could never paraphrase in a way that didn't seem too bold: The word was love!

Once or twice Gertrude almost resented the girl's reticence, yet Lucia's tenderness, respect, appreciation, and even trust toward her also shone through! Sometimes she was irritated, perhaps, by Lucia's modesty, so delicate, so mysterious. But all was forgotten in the comforting thought that came back to her whenever she looked at Lucia: "I am doing something good for this girl." And it was true, because in addition to providing her with a refuge, Gertrude had given Lucia tremendous comfort through her words and her affectionate caresses. Lucia also found solace in keeping busy, and she was forever asking to be given things to do. Even in the parlor she always brought along some work to keep her hands occupied. But painful thoughts have a way of intruding everywhere. As she sewed and sewed—almost a new handicraft for her—she was often reminded of her spinning wheel, and of so many things behind it.

On every second Thursday, the fisherman or another messenger would return, conveying the regards of Padre Cristoforo and confirming Renzo's successful escape. There was no reliable news of his troubles because, as I have told the reader, the Capuchin had hoped to hear something from Padre Bonaventura in Milan, to whom he had referred Renzo. The friar wrote back saying that he had seen neither the man nor the letter, but that someone had indeed come to the monastery asking for him and, not finding him, had left and never returned.

On the third Thursday, no messenger arrived. The poor women felt not only deprived of a hoped and longed for source of comfort, but—as is the case with every little thing for those in difficulty and distress—found further reason for concern and persistent suspicions. Agnese had already been contemplating a quick trip home. When the promised messenger did not show up, she made up her mind to go. For Lucia it was no small matter to be separated from her mother, but her resistance was overcome by her longing to know something and the security she felt in her protected sanctuary. So the two of them decided that Agnese would leave the following day and wait by the road for the fisherman, who should be passing by on his way from Milan. She would ask him for the courtesy of a ride on his cart, so she could be taken back to her mountains.

Agnese managed to find the fisherman, and asked him first whether Fra Cristoforo had any message for her. But the man had been out fishing the whole day before his departure, and hadn't heard anything from the good padre. He offered her a ride home even before she asked for the favor. She took her leave of the Signora and her daughter, and, not without shedding a few tears, promised to send her news as soon as she arrived, and to return soon. With that she left.

Nothing special happened during the trip. The old woman and the fisherman spent part of the night at an inn, as was his custom. Then they departed before dawn so they would arrive in Pescarenico bright and early. Agnese got off in the piazza in front of the

monastery, and said goodbye to her driver with many a "God bless you." Since she was already at the monastery, she thought she might stop by to see her benefactor, the friar, before going home. When she rang the bell, who should open the door but Fra Galdino, the friar who collected walnuts.

"My good woman. What wind blew you in?"

"I came here to see Padre Cristoforo."

"Padre Cristoforo? He's not here."

"Oh? How soon will he back?"

"Who knows?" replied the friar, shrugging his shoulders and retracting his shaven head into his hood.

"Where did he go?"

"To Rimini."

"Where?"

"Rimini."

"Where's that?"

"Ehh," replied the friar, with a hand gesture to indicate that it was quite a distance.

"Oh, poor me! Why did he leave so suddenly?"

"He left at the bidding of the Provincial Father."

"Why was he sent away, when he was doing so much good here? Oh Lord!"

"If our superiors had to explain the orders they give, what would become of obedience, dear woman?"

"Yes, but this will be my ruin!"

"Do you know what might have happened? In Rimini they must have needed a good preacher (we have them everywhere, but sometimes you need just the right one). And the Provincial Father down there must have written to the Provincial Father up here, asking if he had such and such a person. And the Provincial Father here must have said, 'This is a job for Fra Cristoforo.' I'm sure that's what happened."

"God have mercy on us! When did he leave?"

"The day before yesterday."

"If I had only followed my instincts and come back a couple of

days ago! And you wouldn't happen to know when he might be back, more or less?"

"Ah, my dear woman! Only the Provincial Father knows, if even he does. Once our preachers have flown the coop, there's no guessing on which branch they might alight. They want them here, they want them there, and we've got monasteries in the four corners of the world. Let's suppose that in Rimini Fra Cristoforo makes a great impression with his Lenten sermons. You see, he doesn't always improvise them, like he did here, for the fishermen and peasants. For the city pulpits, he has beautiful sermons all written down, and plenty of them. So the word gets out that there's this wonderful preacher, and everyone will be demanding his services from . . . from I don't know where! So he'd have to be sent off again. And since we live off the charity of the whole world, it's only right that we should serve the whole world."

"Oh Lord, oh Lord!" Agnese exclaimed, on the verge of tears. "How will I manage without that man? He was like a father to us! With him gone we'll be ruined."

"Listen, my good woman. Yes, Fra Cristoforo really was a kind man, but we have others, too. Full of charity and talent. Men who know how to deal with both the rich and the poor. Would you like Fra Atanasio? Or Fra Girolamo? How about Fra Zaccaria? He's a man of valor, he is, that Fra Zaccaria. And don't, like certain idiots, dwell on the fact that he's scrawny, with that tiny voice and that straggly beard. I'm not saying he's much of a preacher—we each have our own talents— but he can give you good advice."

"Oh, for heaven's sake!" exclaimed Agnese, with that mix of gratitude and exasperation you feel when presented with an offer that expresses another person's altruism rather than what you need. "What do I care what kind of man this one or that one is or isn't, when the man I need is gone? He was the one who knew our situation and had everything ready to help us!"

"Then you will have to be patient."

"That I know," replied Agnese, "I'm sorry to have troubled you."

"No trouble at all, my dear woman! I am sorry for your sake. If

you decide to seek out one of our friars, the monastery will always be here. And you'll be seeing me again soon, when I am out collecting olive oil."

"Goodbye, then," said Agnese. And she started walking toward her village, desolate, confused, and dismayed, like a blind man who's lost his cane.

Since I myself am somewhat better informed than Fra Galdino, I can tell you what actually happened. As soon as Attilio reached Milan, he paid a visit, as he had promised Don Rodrigo, to the uncle they shared, who sat on the Secret Council. (The Council was a group consisting, at that time, of thirteen leading men of the law and the sword that advised the Governor, and assumed temporary rule in the event of his death or forced vacancy.) The Count, a jurist and a senior member, enjoyed a certain prestige within the Council, and had no rivals in exploiting this fact for his own benefit. He was a master of ambiguous words, significant silences, things left half-said, a wink of the eye that meant, "I'm not allowed to say," flattery without promises, elaborately veiled threats. They all served a single purpose, and they all, more or less, worked in his favor. So much so that even a mere, "There's nothing I can do about it"—often spoken truthfully, but in such a way as to insinuate otherwise—helped to increase the image and thus the reality of his power. Like those boxes you still see in apothecary shops, empty boxes with Arabic labels: They help to uphold the prestige of the shop.

The Count's prestige had been growing by tiny degrees for a very long time, but recently it had taken what you could call a giant step forward, thanks to a trip to Madrid he'd made on a mission to the Royal Court. You should have heard him describe the welcome he had received there. Suffice it to say that the Count-Duke of Olivares had treated him with special regard and taken him into his confidence, as shown, for example, by having once asked him—in the presence, you could say, of half the court—how well he liked Madrid, and, another time in the bay of a window, he told him that the Duomo of Milan was the largest church in His Majesty's domains.

After paying his respects to the Count Uncle and conveying those of his cousin, Attilio adopted a serious expression, which he knew how to adopt at the appropriate time, and said, "I think I am doing my duty, without betraying a confidence of Rodrigo, in bringing to my uncle's attention a matter that, without your intervention, could become serious, and lead to consequences . . ."

"Another one of his messes, I presume."

"In all fairness, I can't say that my cousin is in the wrong this time, but he is quite worked up about it, and as I was saying, our dear Uncle is the only person who can . . ."

"Let's hear it."

"In those parts there is a Capuchin friar who has a grudge against Rodrigo, and things have reached the point that . . ."

"How many times have I told the two of you to let the friars stew in their own juices? They already give enough of a headache to those of us who have to . . . to those whose job it is . . ." At this he heaved a sigh. "But for the two of you, who are able to steer clear of them . . ."

"My dear Uncle, I feel obliged to tell you that Rodrigo would have steered clear of him, if he could have. It's the friar who's out to get him, who started provoking him every which way . . ."

"What the devil does this friar have against my nephew?"

"First of all, the friar's a troublemaker. Everyone knows it, and he makes it his business to go after the nobility. He's taken it upon himself to protect, to advise, to—I don't know!—a peasant girl from around there. He has a fondness for this girl, a fondness . . . that isn't so much selfish as it is jealous, suspicious, and more than a bit ornery."

"I see," said the Count. From beneath the oafish face bestowed upon him by nature, and disguised beneath layers of diplomacy, a ray of malice flashed through that was beautiful to witness.

"For some time now," Attilio continued, "this friar has got it into his head that Rodrigo has some kind of designs on her . . ."

"He got it into his head? I know your cousin, and it'd take a better lawyer than you to acquit him in such an affair."

"My dear Uncle, Rodrigo may well have teased this girl when he ran into her on the street. That much I would believe. He's still young and he's no Capuchin, after all. But it was all trivial stuff that doesn't mean anything. What does matter is that this friar has started talking about Rodrigo as if he were a common criminal, and is trying to turn the whole village against him."

"What about the other friars?"

"They're steering clear of the matter because they know he's a hothead, and for Rodrigo they have the utmost respect. On the other hand, the peasants look up to this friar, because he acts like some sort of saint, and . . ."

"I suppose he doesn't realize that Rodrigo is my nephew."

"On the contrary. It makes him even more ruthless."

"What? What?"

"And he goes around saying—he enjoys baiting Rodrigo even more because he has a natural defender, a man of your stature. He says he's not afraid of the great and powerful, since the cord of Saint Francis is mightier than the sword, and . . ."

"The nerve of that friar! Tell me his name."

"Fra Cristoforo of ***," said Attilio. The Count removed a small notebook from the drawer and, huffing and puffing, wrote down that poor name. Meanwhile, Attilio continued to speak. "He's always been of that temperament. Everyone knows his background. He was a commoner who, after coming into a little money, wanted to keep up with the gentlemen of his town. Angry that he couldn't get the better of them, he killed one of their members. And to avoid the gallows, he became a friar."

"Well done! Splendid! We shall see. We shall see," said the Count, huffing and puffing all the while.

"And now," Attilio continued, "he's angrier than ever. A design that he cared about a great deal went wrong. This should show you what kind of a man he is. He wanted to arrange for the marriage of his little ward. Maybe to remove her from the dangers of the world—do I need to explain more?—or for some other reason. But he wanted her to get married at all costs, and he had found the right

man: another one of his wards, a subject whose name you just might—or rather certainly do—know, since I'm sure that the Secret Council must have dealt with this worthy subject."

"Who is he?"

"A silk-worker, Lorenzo Tramaglino, the one who—"

"Lorenzo Tramaglino!" exclaimed the Count. "Excellent! Well done, Padre! Of course . . . He had a letter for . . . What a pity that . . . But it doesn't matter now. And why didn't Don Rodrigo say something to me about all this? Why did he let this go on without turning to someone who is ready and able to take this matter in hand and come to his assistance?"

"In all honesty," Attilio said, "knowing how many problems, how many things our dear Uncle has on his mind . . ." (the Count, heaving a sigh of agreement, placed his hand on his head, as if to indicate how exhausting it was to bear) ". . . he hesitated to add something else to your burden. So I'll tell you everything. From what I could gather, Rodrigo is so exasperated, so beside himself, so sick of the friar's insults, that he'd rather take justice into his own hands than pursue legal means with the wisdom and the help of his dear Uncle. I tried to calm him down, but seeing things taking a turn for the worse, I felt it was my duty to bring it to the attention of our Uncle, who is ultimately the head of the family and the pillar of this house . . ."

"You would have done better to speak to me earlier."

"You are right, sir. But I was hoping that the matter would take care of itself, or that the friar would finally come to his senses, or leave that monastery, as happens with the men of that order, who are here one day and gone the next. Then the whole story would be behind us by now. But . . ."

"Now it's up to me to set things right."

"That is exactly what I was thinking. I said to myself, 'Our uncle, with his shrewdness, his authority, will know how to prevent a scandal, and at the same time, preserve the honor of Rodrigo, who shares his blood. This friar, I was saying, is always going on about the cord of Saint Francis, but there's more than one way to use it,

and not just around the waist. Our uncle must have a hundred means to . . . ' I don't know. But I do know that the Father Provincial is very deferential toward you, as indeed he should be. And if our uncle thinks that, in this case, the best solution would be for the friar to have . . . maybe a change of scene, a couple of words to the right person . . ."

"Leave the thinking to me," said the Count, rather gruffly.

"Of course," exclaimed Attilio, bowing his head and adopting a forlorn expression. "Who am I to give advice to our dear Uncle? I speak only out of the great love I reserve for the family honor. And I'm afraid I've made another mistake," he added pensively. "I'm afraid I may have wronged Rodrigo in making our Uncle think poorly of him. I could never forgive myself if I led you to believe that Rodrigo does not have every faith in you, as well as all the deference that is your due. Believe me, Uncle, in this case it was just . . ."

"Come. Come. What could ever come between the two of you? You will be friends forever, until one of you wises up. You're a couple of rascals, always getting into trouble, and then I have to step in and patch things up . . . This might sound crazy, but the two of you give me more to worry about than [and here you can imagine how deeply he sighed] all these blessed affairs of state."

Attilio uttered a few more apologies, a few more promises, a few more compliments. Then he took his leave and left, ushered out by a, "Don't do anything stupid!" which was the Count Uncle's customary farewell to his nephews.

Chapter 19

Anyone who spotted a weed in a neglected field—a nice wild sorrel, say—and wanted to know whether it had come from a seed that had sprouted in the field, was blown in by the wind, or had been dropped there by a bird, would never, no matter how long they pondered it, reach a conclusion. Nor can we say whether it was from the natural depths of his brain or from Attilio's insinuations that the Count Uncle decided to make use of the Father Provincial to untie Rodrigo's tangled knot.

Attilio had not chosen his words casually, and while he might have worried that such a bold suggestion would sting his uncle's overweening but brittle pride, he still wanted to dangle it before him and thus set him on the path he hoped he would take. Yet that solution was so suited to his uncle's temperament, so prescribed by the circumstances, that even without being prodded, you can bet he would have found it by himself.

Now that a war of sorts had been declared, the Count could not allow someone bearing his name, his own nephew, to wind up on the losing end, which could damage his reputation as a powerful man. The revenge that his nephew might seek on his own would be a cure worse than the disease, and spark greater problems. Rodrigo had to be stopped by every means possible, without a minute to spare. If he were ordered by the Count to leave his village immediately, he might refuse. Even if he did leave, it would be a retreat, the aristocracy surrendering the field to the clergy. Rules, laws, and other such bogeymen were useless against such an adversary. The regular and lay clergy were immune from secular jurisdiction—as

were their places of residence—as even someone who has read no other story than this one should know. Otherwise the friar would be easy game. The best tactic against such an adversary was to get him transferred, and the means by which this could be accomplished was through the Father Provincial, who had the power to decide whether the friar should be moved or kept in place.

Now, the Father Provincial and the Count Uncle were old acquaintances. They saw each other rarely, but always with elaborate displays of friendship and extravagant offers of favors. Sometimes it is easier to deal with a leader of many individuals than a single individual, who sees only his own cause, feels only his own passion, and defends only his own concerns. A leader can see at a glance a hundred connections, a hundred consequences, a hundred interests, a hundred things to shun, and a hundred things to preserve. Which also means that he can be approached in a hundred different ways.

After weighing the matter carefully, the Count invited the Father Provincial to dinner, along with other exquisitely selected guests: the most noble of his kinsmen, men of ancient noble lineage, who by their bearing, innate confidence, and aristocratic nonchalance—speaking of great things in familiar terms—managed, effortlessly, to constantly reinforce and renew an aura of superiority and power. There were also a few lackeys, bound to the family by hereditary employment, and to the Count by a lifetime of servitude. They said yes to everything, starting with the soup course. They said yes with their mouths, with their eyes, with their ears, and with their whole heads, whole bodies, and whole souls. By the time the fruit came round they were little more than men who no longer remembered how to say no.

At the table, the host quickly steered the conversation to his favorite subject. Many roads lead to Rome, but for the Count they all led to Madrid. He spoke of the court, of the Count-Duke, of the ministers, the family of the Governor, the bullfights that he could describe in detail since he had enjoyed them from a privileged perch. He spoke of El Escorial, which he could describe in the most

minute detail, since a protégé of the Count-Duke, a *creado,* had taken him on a tour of every nook and cranny.

For a while the assembled guests, a captive audience, sat listening to him and him alone. Then they split off into private conversations, while the host continued to describe more of those fine things, as if in confidence, to the Father Provincial, who was seated next to him and allowed him to go on, and on, and on. But at a certain point, the priest steered the conversation away from Madrid, from one court to another, and from one dignitary to another, in the direction of Cardinal Barberini, a Capuchin friar, brother to none other than the current Pope, Urban VIII. At that point the Count had to allow someone else to speak for a while, and sat there listening, forced to remember that the world did not consist solely of people who did his bidding. When everyone got up from the table, he asked the Father Provincial to join him in the next room.

Two authorities, two gray-haired men, two seasoned veterans, stood face-to-face. The Magnificent Lord invited the Most Reverend Father to have a seat, and then sat down himself. He began: "Considering the friendship between us, I thought I might have a word with Your Reverence about a matter of common concern, to be settled between the two of us, without resorting to other means. To put it plainly, with my heart in my hand, I'll tell you what this is about. And in a nutshell, I'm sure you'll agree. Tell me. At your order's monastery in Pescarenico, do you know of a certain Padre Cristoforo from ***?"

The Provincial indicated that he did.

"Tell me, Your Reverence, in all frankness, as a friend . . . this subject . . . this padre . . . I don't know him personally, although I do know quite a few Capuchins: good men, zealous, prudent, humble. I've been a friend to the order since I was a boy . . . But in every big family . . . there is always one individual, one hothead . . . and this Padre Cristoforo, I know from certain information I have gathered that he's a man . . . who's always itching for a fight . . . who doesn't exhibit all the prudence, all the deference . . . I'd be willing to bet he's given you more than one headache."

"Ah," said the Provincial to himself, "he wants a favor. My fault: I knew that blessed Cristoforo was a subject who had to be transferred from pulpit to pulpit, and not left for months in the same place, especially in a country monastery."

"Oh," he said out loud, "I'm truly sorry to hear that Your Magnificence should have such an impression of Padre Cristoforo. To my knowledge, he's a priest who's . . . exemplary inside the monastery, and held in high regard outside of it, as well."

"I understand perfectly. Your Reverence has to . . . But, but, as a sincere friend, I wish to advise you of an important matter. And even if you have already been informed, I can, out of a sense of duty, make you aware of potential . . . consequences. That's all I'll say for now. This Padre Cristoforo, we know that he was protecting a man from those parts, a man . . . Your Reverence will have heard him mentioned. The man who escaped from the hands of justice—what a scandal!—on that awful Saint Martin's Day, after having done things . . . things . . . I am speaking of Lorenzo Tramaglino!"

"Aha," thought the Provincial. Then he replied, "This circumstance comes as news to me. But Your Magnificence is well aware that it is our mission to seek out wayward souls, and set them on the path of . . ."

"Of course, but only certain wayward souls . . . These are thorny questions, delicate matters . . ." At this, rather than puffing up his cheeks and exhaling, he pursed his lips and took in as much air as he usually let out. Picking up where he left off, he added, "I thought I should apprise you of this circumstance, because if Your Reverence were ever to . . . Well, formal complaints might be lodged with Rome . . . it has nothing to do with me . . . but from Rome you might get . . ."

"I am grateful to Your Magnificence for this notification. But I am certain that, if inquiries are made into this allegation, it will be found that Padre Cristoforo has had no dealings with the man you've mentioned, other than to set him on the path of righteousness. Padre Cristoforo is someone I know."

"Then you know better than I what kind of a man he was before taking his vows, the mischief he got into in his youth."

"The glory of the habit, my dear Count, is that even a man with some notoriety in the secular life becomes another person once he wears it. And ever since Padre Cristoforo donned the habit . . ."

"I'd like to believe you, I mean it, I'd really like to believe you. But sometimes, as the proverb says . . . the habit does not make the monk."

That isn't quite what the proverb says, but in his haste the Count had confused it with another that came to the tip of his tongue: *Vulpem pilum mutare, non mores*—the fox sheds its fur, not its habits.

"I have received proof," he continued, "confirmation."

"If you know for certain," the Father Provincial said, "that this priest has committed some wrong (we all have our failings), I would truly appreciate being informed. I am his superior. Although I may not be worthy, it is my job to correct, to remediate."

"Then I will tell you. Together with the unfortunate circumstance of this friar's open protection of the person I mentioned, there is another unpleasant matter, which could . . . But, between the two of us, we can settle this matter today. It would seem that this same Padre Cristoforo has been picking fights with my nephew Don Rodrigo ***."

"Oh, I'm so sorry to hear this. I'm sorry. Truly I am."

"My nephew is young, brash, with a high opinion of himself. He's not used to being provoked . . ."

"I will make it my duty to look into this matter. As I have already told Your Magnificence—and I am speaking with a gentleman who is as fair-minded as he is experienced—we are all made of flesh and blood, prone to error . . . in both the body, and the soul. And if Padre Cristoforo has failed to . . ."

"You see, Your Reverence, these are things that, as I was saying, should remain between us, things that we should settle here and now, because if we stir them up . . . matters will only get worse. And you know what will happen next. These skirmishes, these clashes,

sometimes start over nothing, and then they go on and on . . . If you try to get to the bottom of it, there will either be no end, or a hundred other problems will arise. We need to nip it in the bud, Reverend Father, nip it in the bud. My nephew is young. The friar, from what I hear, still has all the energy and the . . . inclinations of a young man. And it's up to us, with the weight of our years . . . sad but true, eh, Reverend Father?"

For anyone witnessing this exchange, it would be as if, while at the opera, the backdrop had been raised too early, by mistake, in the middle of the scene, revealing the singer—unaware that the audience is watching—chatting freely with a colleague. The face, the actions, and the voice of the Count, in uttering that "sad but true," were completely natural. For once, there was no pretense. The weight of his years really did bother him. Not that he missed the amusements, the brio, the beauty of youth: frivolous, foolish, miserable stuff! The reason for his unhappiness was more concrete and significant. He aspired to a higher post, once it became vacant, and feared that time was running out. If he got what he wanted, you can be sure that his age would no longer matter to him. He would want nothing more, and he would die happy, as everyone assures us they will the moment they attain something they have wanted badly.

"It's up to us," he continued, "to show better judgment than our young people, and to sort out their misdeeds. Luckily we still have time. The matter hasn't drawn a lot of attention, and can be nipped in the bud, *principiis obsta.* Keep the lit match away from the straw. Sometimes a subject who behaves badly or causes trouble in one place might succeed brilliantly in another. Your Reverence can surely find the right niche for this friar. And let's not forget that other circumstance, which might raise the suspicions of someone who . . . who might wish for him to be removed. By assigning him someplace far away from here, we would be killing two birds with one stone. Everything would take care of itself. Or rather, no harm would be done."

This is the conclusion that the Father Provincial had been expecting since the beginning of their colloquy. "Of course!" he

thought. "I can see where this is going. As always, whenever a poor friar starts to annoy the men of your circle, or even just one of you, and disturbs you in some way, then immediately, without finding out whether he is right or wrong, his superior is expected to get rid of him."

When the Count had finished, and let out a long sigh that was the equivalent of a full stop, the Provincial replied. "I understand perfectly what the Count wishes to say. But before taking such a measure . . ."

"It both is and isn't a measure, Reverend Father. Nothing could be more natural, more ordinary. And if you don't take it, and immediately, I predict a mountain of troubles, an Iliad of disorder . . . A rash act . . . no, not by my nephew . . . I can rein him in . . . but at this point, if we don't end it now, without wasting time, through a clean cut, we won't be able to stop it, to keep it secret . . . and then it will involve more than just my nephew . . . It'll stir up a hornet's nest, Reverend Father. You see, we are a prominent family. We have friends . . ."

"In high places."

"So you do understand. They are all people whose blood runs blue, which counts for something in our world . . . Our honor is at stake, this is a family matter. And then . . . even the most law-abiding . . . It would break my heart to have to . . . to be forced to . . . I who have always been so generous to the Capuchin order! To continue to do the good deeds you do, in edifying the common people, you priests need peace and quiet, not strife, you need to be in harmony with those who . . . not to mention priests who have family members outside the monastery . . . these squabbles over honor, over nothing, go on forever, spread, and before you know it . . . half the world is at war. I happen to be in a position that requires me to maintain a certain decorum . . . The Governor, my peers on the Council . . . they would all make common cause . . . especially considering that other matter . . . You know how these things go."

"To be honest," said the Father Provincial, "Padre Cristoforo is a

gifted preacher. I was already thinking of . . . and I had been asked to do that very thing . . . but to do it now, at this moment, in these circumstances, might make it seem like a punishment, and a punishment before having clearly defined . . ."

"No, not a punishment: a precautionary measure, a mutually beneficial solution, to prevent the harm that might . . . have I made myself clear?"

"The Count and I might see the issue in these terms, of course. But given the facts reported to Your Magnificence, I think it impossible that word hasn't gotten out in the village. Everywhere you look there are instigators, troublemakers, or at the very least malicious busybodies who get a kind of mad pleasure out of seeing the nobility and the clergy at one another's throats. They smell something in the air, put two and two together, gossip . . . Everyone has his own decorum to maintain. And then I, as an (unworthy) superior, have an express duty . . . the honor of the habit . . . this is not a personal matter . . . it is a trust vested in me . . . Your nephew, since he is so angry, as Your Magnificence says, might interpret this measure as his personal revenge and start to . . . I'm not saying boast about it, or gloat, but rather . . ."

"Really, Most Reverend Father? My nephew is a gentleman, esteemed by society . . . in keeping with his rank and his duties. But in my presence he is a boy, and he will do neither more nor less than I tell him to do. What's more, I'll make sure my nephew knows nothing of this. Do we really need to account to anyone? These are matters that can be handled between us, as good friends, and between us they shall remain. Don't give it a second thought. In a position like mine, one is used to keeping secrets." At this he heaved another sigh. "As for the busybodies," he continued, "what's the most they can say? A friar being sent to preach in another village: What could be more normal? And for those of us who see . . . those of us who prevent . . . those of us whose duty it is . . . we need not worry about gossip."

"But, to prevent that from happening, it would be wise, on this one occasion, for your nephew to make some show of, some public

display of friendship, of regard . . . not so much for us, but for the order . . ."

"Of course, of course. That would only be fair . . . But it's hardly necessary. I know that the Capuchins always receive the proper recognition from my nephew. It is his natural inclination, and a family tradition. And he knows he's doing something I appreciate. Nevertheless, in this particular case . . . something special . . . would be more than fair. Let me handle it, Most Reverend Father. I'll instruct my nephew . . . what I mean is that the matter will have to be broached very carefully, so that he gets no inkling of what has passed between us. I would not want us to place a bandage where there's no wound! As for our understanding, the sooner it's taken care of, the better. And if you were to find the right niche for him at a good distance from here . . . to eliminate any opportunity . . ."

"It just so happens that I have, in fact, received a request from Rimini for a preacher. And I might have even, for no other reason, set my sights on . . ."

"That would be just the thing, just the thing. When would this be . . . ?"

"Seeing as it has to be done, it will be done soon."

"Sooner rather than later, Most Reverend Father. Better today than tomorrow. And," he continued, as he stood up from his chair, "if there is anything I or my family can do for the good Capuchin brothers . . ."

"We know from experience the generosity of your house," said the Father Provincial, also rising and following the victor to the door.

"We have extinguished a spark," said the Count, pausing for a moment, "a spark, Most Reverend Father, that could have started a conflagration. A couple of words between friends is all it takes to settle things."

He opened the door and insisted absolutely that the Father Provincial go first. They entered the next room and rejoined the rest of the company.

Great cunning, great skill, and great eloquence had been in-

vested by the Count in managing the affair, but the result was equal to his efforts. In fact, through the conversation we have reported, he also succeeded in forcing Padre Cristoforo to go from Pescarenico to Rimini on foot, which is a very long walk indeed.

One night soon after, a Capuchin from Milan arrived in Pescarenico with an envelope for the Father Guardian. Inside was an order of transfer for Fra Cristoforo to go to Rimini, where he would deliver the Lenten sermons. The cover letter to the Guardian instructed him to tell said friàr to cease any and all thoughts of matters he might be attending to in the village he was leaving, and to discontinue all related correspondence. The bearer of the letter would be his travel companion. The Guardian said nothing that night. In the morning he summoned Fra Cristoforo, showed him the order, and told him to fetch his basket, his walking stick, his cloak, and his belt, and set out on the journey immediately with the messenger friar.

Whether this came as a blow to our friend, I will leave to your imagination. His first thoughts were of Renzo, Lucia, and Agnese. And to himself he exclaimed, for lack of a better word, "Oh God! What will those poor souls do once I am gone?" But then he raised his eyes to heaven and repented for his lack of faith, for presuming he was indispensable. He crossed his arms over his chest in a gesture of obedience and bowed his head before the Father Guardian, who drew him aside and gave him the other warning, advising him to cease all communication with Lucia and Renzo, in the form of an order. Padre Cristoforo went to his cell, placed his breviary, his Lenten sermons, and the bread of forgiveness inside his basket, cinched his tunic with the leather belt, bid farewell to the brothers in the monastery, and lastly went to receive the blessing of the Guardian. Then, with his fellow traveler, he set out on the road that had been ordained.

I mentioned a while back that Don Rodrigo, who was more intent than ever on fulfilling his long-dreamed-of design, had decided to seek the assistance of a fearsome man. I cannot give his first name, family name, title, or even guess as to what they might

be: all the stranger, since we find records of him in more than one book (printed books, I mean) from that period. He is undoubtedly the same character, since all the facts match up, but everywhere great effort has been taken to avoid stating his name, as if it might scorch the pen and hand of the writer. Francesco Rivola, in his biography of Federigo Borromeo, called this character, "A lord as mighty in wealth as he was noble in birth," and left it at that. Giuseppe Ripamonti, in the fifth book of the fifth decade of his *Storia patria,* mentions him at greater length, referring to him as "one," "the former," "the latter," "this man," and "that character." "I will relate," he writes in his elegant Latin, which I will translate as best I can, "the case of a certain man who, although one of the preeminent leaders of the city, had established his residence in the countryside, near the border. And there, securing his protection through crime, he ignored the judgments of the courts, judges, every prosecutor, and even the Crown. The life he led was wholly independent. He harbored fugitives, having once been a fugitive himself; after which he returned home as if nothing had happened . . ." From Ripamonti we shall borrow other passages that suit our purposes to confirm or elucidate the tale of the anonymous author of the manuscript, whom we shall continue to follow.

To do whatever the law prohibited or any power opposed; to declare oneself the arbiter, the master, of other people's affairs, for no good reason other than the thrill of command; to be feared by all, and deferred to by those more accustomed to receiving deference: These had always been his main passions. Ever since his youth, the roar and the spectacle of so much violence and so many duels, the sight of so many tyrants, had filled him with a mix of contempt and impatient envy. As a young man living in the city, he never missed an opportunity, and indeed often went looking, to quarrel with the most notorious tyrants, to get in their way, to size them up, put them in their place, or force them to seek his friendship. Superior in wealth and retinue to most, and in audacity and determination to perhaps all, he bullied many men into submission, roughed up many, and made friends of many more. Not friends on

an equal footing, to be sure, but lesser friends—the only kind he liked—who acknowledged themselves as his inferiors, and always granted him the right of way.

In effect, however, he became the fixer, the instrument, for them all. They never failed to ask for the support of such a useful ally when it came to their dirty work. For him to refuse would have compromised his reputation. So whether on his own or on another's behalf, he ended up breaking so many laws that neither his name, nor his family, nor his friends, nor his audacity could shield him from banishment. In the face of powerful opposition, he had to retreat and leave the state. I believe this is what Ripamonti was referring to in a remarkable passage: "When he was banished from the town, consider the discretion, respectfulness, and reserve with which he left: He crossed the city on horseback, accompanied by a pack of hounds, to the blaring of a horn; and as he passed before the court palace, he left the guards with an impertinent message to convey to the Governor."

From his place of exile, he did not interrupt his affairs or neglect his correspondence with the friends who continued to associate with him, "in occult league with atrocious counsel and grievous deeds," to translate Ripamonti literally. Indeed, in this period he seems to have contracted with influential persons to conduct some terrible new business, which the above-mentioned historian describes with mysterious brevity. "Even some foreign princes," he writes, "availed themselves of his services more than once, for an important assassination, and they often sent him reinforcements of men from afar to serve under his command."

Finally (after how long we do not know), either the banishment was lifted through the intercession of a powerful man, or his audacity was as good as immunity. He decided to return home, and return he did. Not to Milan, however, but to a castle bordering the territory of Bergamo, which at that time, as everyone knows, belonged to the Venetian Republic. "That house," I again quote Ripamonti, "was like an assassin's workshop: servants, on whose own heads there was a bounty, whose job it was to cut off the heads of

other men. Neither cooks nor scullery boys were exempt from murderous duties; the boys' hands were drenched in blood." In addition to this lovely domestic family, he had, according to the same historian, another one consisting of similar subjects, scattered and garrisoned, so to speak, in various places throughout the two states on whose border he lived, always ready to carry out his orders.

At one point or another, every petty tyrant for a wide swath of the surrounding countryside had been forced to choose between being friends or enemies with this much more powerful tyrant. Things had gone so badly for the first men who tried to resist him, however, that no one felt like following in their footsteps. Nor could they secure independence from him by minding their own business and keeping to themselves. He would send messages ordering them to abandon such and such an enterprise or stop bothering such and such a debtor, and the like. And they had to answer yes or no.

When one party to a dispute requested his arbitration in a business matter, offering a vow of fealty, the other party had to make the difficult choice of either accepting his ruling or becoming his enemy—the equivalent, as has already been said, of the final stage of consumption. Many who were in the wrong went to him to be declared in the right. So did many who were in the right, to gain a powerful patron and preempt an adversary. Both types of men became his special employees.

Occasionally a weak victim, tormented by a bully, would turn to him. Taking the underdog's part, he would force the bully to stop, make amends for the damage he had done, and apologize. If the man resisted, he would go after him so aggressively that the bully would have to leave the places he had tyrannized, or pay a swifter and more terrible price. And in these cases, that dreaded and abhorred name would be momentarily blessed, because in those days, this kind of compensation, not exactly justice, but rather a remedy, was not forthcoming from any other authority, private or public.

More often, as a general rule in fact, he administered to evil intentions, atrocious vengeance, and arrogant whims. No matter how he used his power, the effect it produced was always the same: to

impress people with how much he could and would do with no regard for right and wrong: two things that obstruct men's wishes in so many ways, and so often force them to reconsider.

Each petty tyrant's fame was limited mainly to the tiny part of the country that was richest and most powerful. Each district had its own despots, but they were all so alike that people had no reason to worry about anyone other than the despots on their doorstep. But the fame of our tyrant was spread throughout the Duchy of Milan: Everywhere his life was the subject of folklore, and his name conveyed something irresistible, strange, and fabled. The suspicion that he had allies and assassins everywhere also kept his reputation alive everywhere. But they were only suspicions, for who would openly admit to being in his employ? Any tyrant might be his accomplice, and every criminal one of his men. This uncertainty itself made his notoriety even greater, and the fear of it even more oppressive. Whenever a strange and particularly savage bravo appeared somewhere, or whenever a horrific crime was committed whose perpetrator could not immediately be named or guessed, people said or whispered the name of the man who we, thanks to our authors' blessed (to avoid using another word) circumspection, are forced to call the Nameless One.

The distance from his lair to the palace of Don Rodrigo was no more than seven miles. The moment Don Rodrigo became master and tyrant, he must have realized that he would be unable to exercise his own tyranny without confronting or forging an alliance with his neighbor. So he offered to be, and then became, a friend, like everyone else. Don Rodrigo had done his friend more than one favor (that's all the manuscript says), and each time he received assurances that the favor would be returned at any time. But he was very careful to hide this friendship, or at least not to disclose its nature and just how close it was. Don Rodrigo did indeed aspire to be a tyrant, but not a brutal and solitary tyrant; for him this profession was a means, not an end. He wanted to live freely in the city, enjoy the comforts, entertainments, and honors of city life. This meant that he had to practice a certain restraint, consider his rela-

tives, cultivate the friendship of important people, and keep a hand on the scales of justice, to make sure they would, as needed, tip in his favor, disappear, or, on occasion, land on someone's head, which could be easier than meting out personal violence. Because of that, public knowledge of his closeness, or rather collusion, with a man of that ilk, a sworn enemy of law and order, would not have been very convenient, especially with his uncle the Count. But he was able to pass off that modicum of friendship as a necessary and therefore readily comprehensible association with a man whose enmity would be too dangerous. For if the man who is supposed to administer justice has neither the will nor the way, he ultimately allows others to take matters into their own hands, to an extent. And while he may not grant his express consent, he will turn a blind eye.

One morning, Don Rodrigo went out on horseback, as if in a hunting party, with a small escort of bravi on foot. Griso walked by his side, and four others followed, as he set off for the castle of the Nameless One.

Chapter 20

The castle of the Nameless One loomed over a narrow, damp valley, atop a bluff that jutted out from the rugged mountain chain to which it was either connected or separated—it was hard to tell—by a massif of crags and boulders, and a maze of caves and cliffs that extended in both directions. The side facing the valley was the only accessible one; although it was at a steep incline, it was smooth and unbroken, with meadows at the summit, cultivated plots on the slopes, and cottages scattered here and there. At the base was a bed of pebbles over which, depending on the season, ran a rivulet or a mighty stream, which in those days served as a border between the two states, the Duchy of Milan and the Republic of Venice. The opposite end of the valley was demarcated by another wall of mountains, which also had some farmland on the slopes, though most of it was shattered rock and boulder, and sheer rock faces, pathless and barren, except for an occasional shrub poking out of a crevice or along a ledge.

From the heights of his horrid castle, like the eagle in its gory nest, the savage lord dominated every inch of the area where a man might set foot. He never saw anyone above him, or even higher up. Looking around, he could survey his enclave: the hills, the floor of the valley, and the roads traveled within it. There was one path that twisted and turned its way up to his ghastly domicile, unfurling like a ribbon before the man who was gazing down on it. Through the castle windows and embrasures, the lord could easily count the footsteps of anyone who approached, and aim his weapons a hundred times over. With the garrison of bravi he kept up there, he

could flatten or send tumbling down the hill many members of even a large company before a single one managed to reach the top. All of which is to say that no one would dare set foot up there or in the valley, or even just pass through, who wasn't in the good graces of the lord of the castle. If a law officer were detected, he would be treated like a captured enemy spy. Tragic stories were told of those who had attempted such an enterprise, but the stories were already old, and none of the younger generation remembered ever having seen a man of that type in the valley, dead or alive.

This is how the anonymous author describes the place, but he never mentions its name. Indeed, to keep us from finding out its specific whereabouts, he says nothing about Don Rodrigo's trip, and sets him immediately in the valley, at the foot of the bluff, and the start of that steep and winding path. Here there was a tavern that might as well have been called a guardhouse. Over the door hung an old sign with a radiant sun painted on both sides. For the common people, who sometimes repeat names handed down to them, and sometimes invent their own, it was simply the "Malanotte," the "evil night."

At the sound of a horse approaching, a tough-looking youth appeared at the door, armed like a Saracen. After a quick look around, he went back inside to inform three thugs who were playing a game with greasy old cards bent like roof tiles. The one who seemed to be in charge stood up, went to the door, and, recognizing one of his master's friends, greeted him with respect. Don Rodrigo returned the greeting politely, and asked if the lord was up at the castle. When the man replied that he thought so, Don Rodrigo dismounted and tossed the horse's reins to Tiradritto, one of his own bodyguards. He removed his musket and handed it to Montanarolo, as if to relieve himself of a useless burden so he could climb the hill more easily. In reality, he was well aware that he wouldn't be allowed up with a weapon. He dug a few berlingas out of his pocket and handed them to Tanabuso, saying, "You can all wait here, and have some fun with these good people." Then he took out a few gold scudi and placed them in the leader's hand, half for him, the

other half to be divided up among his men. Finally, together with Griso, who had also set his musket aside, he began the ascent on foot. The three bravi, plus Squinternotto, making it four (do you notice these names? Remember them with care), stayed behind with the Nameless One's own three bravi, and the lookout boy, to play cards, imbibe, and boast of their exploits.*

Another of the Nameless One's foul bravi, also on his way to the castle, caught up with Don Rodrigo a few minutes later. He recognized him at a glance, and accompanied him the rest of the way. This spared Don Rodrigo the annoyance of having to say his name and explain who he was to anyone he might run into who didn't know him. Once he'd reached the castle and gone in (leaving Griso at the door), he had to pass through a maze of dark corridors and across a series of rooms whose walls were hung with muskets, sabers, and polearms, in each of which a bravo or two stood guard. After waiting for quite a while, he was admitted into the presence of the Nameless One.

The latter came up to him, returned his greeting, and at the same time inspected his face and hands, an old habit that he had come to apply almost unconsciously to anyone who approached him, even his most trusted friends. He was tall, swarthy, and almost completely bald. The few remaining hairs on his head were white. His face was lined. At first sight, he looked older than his sixty years, although his demeanor and movements, his harsh features, and the sinister but lively gleam in his eyes indicated a strength of body and mind that would have been extraordinary in a much younger man.

Don Rodrigo said that he had come for advice and for help; that finding himself engaged in a difficult enterprise, which he could not renounce, for the sake of his honor, he remembered the promises of

* Don Rodrigo's bravi all have nicknames that translate, roughly, to "Straight Shooter" (Tiradritto), "Hillbilly" (Montanarolo), "Much Abused" (Tanabuso), and "Screw Loose" (Squinternotto). The Nameless One's bravi, like their master, have no names (with the exception of Nibbio).

a man whose promises were never exaggerated or empty. He started to describe his wicked imbroglio. The Nameless One, who had already heard vague reports of Don Rodrigo's troubles, listened carefully, out of a curiosity for such stories, and since this one involved a name he knew and detested: Fra Cristoforo, a sworn enemy of tyrants, in word and, where possible, in deeds. Don Rodrigo, knowing with whom he spoke, started to dramatize the difficulties of his enterprise, the distance of the place, a convent, the Signora! . . . At this, the Nameless One suddenly interrupted him, as if commanded by a demon lurking in his heart, to say that he would take the matter in hand. As he made a note of our poor Lucia's name, he dismissed Don Rodrigo, adding, "You will receive instructions from me shortly on what you have to do."

The reader may remember that reprobate Egidio, who lived next to the convent where poor Lucia had taken refuge. You should know that he was one of the closest and most intimate partners in crime of the Nameless One, which is why the latter had given Don Rodrigo his word so quickly and readily. As soon as he was alone, however, he did not so much regret, I would say, as resent that he had given it. For some time now, he had been feeling, if not remorse, then a certain disquiet over his evil ways. A lifetime of crime had amassed in his memory, if not in his conscience, which was reawakened with each new act, pressing down on him in all its ugliness and multitude, an already uncomfortable burden growing heavier and heavier. The revulsion he had experienced at his first crimes, which he had later overcome and almost completely repressed, had now returned to make itself felt. In his early years, the prospect of a long, indefinite future and the sense of a vigorous vitality had filled him with an easy confidence. Nowadays, though, his thoughts of the future made the past even more unbearable. "To grow old—to die. And then?"

Remarkably, the image of death that, when danger was near, or he found himself face-to-face with an enemy, used to fire his spirits and instill in him a courageous rage, now gripped him with panic when it appeared to him in the still of night, in the safety of his

castle. It was not the threat of death at the hands of a mortal enemy like himself. Nor could it be repelled by superior weapons or a quicker hand. This death came alone, and from deep within. It might still have been distant, but it was creeping up on him steadily. And even as his mind painfully struggled to banish the thought, it came closer and closer.

In the early days, the almost constant spectacle of violence, revenge, and murder had instilled in him a ferocious desire for more, and given him an authority that overruled his conscience. Now, his mind was revisited every now and then by the vague but terrifying idea of being judged before God, of an accounting that would not ignore his crimes. Now, having outmatched the vulgar ranks of the wicked to stand above them, he was sometimes filled with an overwhelming sense of loneliness. He had heard God mentioned, but long refused to acknowledge or deny Him, since his only concern had been to live as if there were no God. Now, in moments of inexplicable despondency and unfounded terror, he imagined hearing His voice crying out from within: "YET I AM!"

In the heat of youthful passion, the law he had heard proclaimed in God's name (but not heeded) had seemed hateful, nothing more. Now, when that same law suddenly sprang to mind, despite his best efforts, he saw it as inescapable. Rather than admit his new anxieties to another person, however, he buried them deep inside, and concealed them beneath a mask of even greater brutality. He also tried to hide them from himself and stifle them, in the same way. Ruing the days (since he could neither erase nor forget them) when he used to commit outrage without remorse, with no other thought than to succeed, he made every effort to bring that time back, and hold on to or regain his former willpower—ready, proud, unperturbed—in order to convince himself that he was still that same man.

So on this occasion, he had immediately given his word to Don Rodrigo in order to stave off any hesitation. As soon as the latter had left, however, he started to feel a wavering in the resolve he had

just mustered. He started to feel the slow encroachment of temptations to go back on his promise, which would have made him lose face with a friend, a minor accomplice. To put an immediate end to that agonizing conflict, he summoned Nibbio, one of the most skillful and daring ministers of his iniquity, to whom he usually assigned all correspondence with Egidio. With a resolute air, he ordered him to mount a horse at once and go straight to Monza, inform Egidio of the commitment he had made, and request his assistance in fulfilling it.

The fiendish messenger came back with Egidio's reply sooner than his master had expected: The deed would be easily done. A coach should be provided, along with two or three well-disguised bravi; he would handle everything else, and take charge of the matter. At this news, the Nameless One, despite his misgivings, quickly ordered Nibbio to provide for everything Egidio had requested, and to set out on the expedition with two others that he named.

If Egidio had been forced to rely only on his usual resources to perform the dreadful task requested of him, he would never have agreed so quickly and decisively. But inside that sanctuary, where everything seemed to be an obstacle, the heinous youth had a secret weapon; the very thing that would have posed the greatest difficulty for others was an advantage for him. We have already described how the wretched Signora had succumbed to his words. The reader might have realized that this would be her first step—but not her last—down the road to abomination and bloodshed. The same voice that had become stronger and, I would almost say, more authoritative because of her crime, now demanded that she sacrifice the innocent girl she was supposed to protect.

The proposal left Gertrude in shock. To lose Lucia through no fault of her own, through an unforeseen accident, would have already felt like a misfortune, a bitter punishment. But now she was being ordered to deprive herself of the girl through treachery, to convert a means of atonement into a source of remorse. The hapless woman tried every possible way to avoid carrying out the

abominable order; everything, that is, except the way of righteousness, which had always been open to her. Crime is a rigid and unyielding taskmaster that can only be overcome through total rebellion, which Gertrude could not bring herself to do, so she obeyed.

The day had come and the appointed hour was near. Gertrude, alone with Lucia in her private parlor, showed more tenderness than usual, and Lucia accepted and returned her affection with growing fondness. Like the lamb that trembles fearlessly under the shepherd's hand as he softly pets her and pulls her along, she turns to lick his hand, not realizing that waiting outside the pen is the butcher to whom she has just been sold.

"I have an important errand, and only you can do it for me. There are many people in my service, but not a single one I can trust. It's a sensitive matter that I will explain to you later. I need to speak right away with the Father Guardian of the Capuchins who brought you to me, my poor Lucia. But no one can know that I sent for him. You are the only person who can deliver this secret message for me."

Lucia was terrified by this request. Submissively, but without hiding her dismay, she tried to excuse herself for reasons that the Signora surely understood and should have foreseen. She shouldn't be going alone, without her mother, without anyone, down an isolated road, in a strange town . . . But Gertrude, educated in the ways of evil, made a show of dismissing her excuses, acting so surprised and so displeased to encounter such reluctance in the one person whom she thought she could trust. But it would be in broad daylight! Just a short walk! On a road that Lucia had traveled a few days before! And, even if she had never seen the monastery, it was impossible to miss if she followed directions! . . . She made such a fuss that the poor girl, her gratitude evoked and her feelings hurt, relented and said, "All right, then. What exactly do I have to do?"

"Go to the Capuchin monastery," and the Signora described the road again, "ask for the Father Guardian. Tell him, in private, to

come to me right away, but not to tell a soul that I am the one who sent for him."

"But what should I tell the stewardess, who has never seen me leave and is sure to ask where I'm going?"

"Try to slip past her without being seen. And if you can't, tell her that you're going to a church, where you'd promised to say a prayer."

Here was a new difficulty for the poor girl: to tell a lie. But once again the Signora acted so offended by her reluctance and made her feel so wrong to place vain scruples before gratitude, that Lucia, bewildered rather than convinced, and more emotional than ever, replied, "All right, I'll go. May God help me!" And she started to leave.

When Gertrude, who from behind the grating was following her with a steady but tortured gaze, saw Lucia set foot on the threshold, she opened her mouth, overcome by an irresistible impulse, and said, "Wait, Lucia!"

The girl stopped and turned toward the grating. By then, however, another thought, which was accustomed to prevailing, had already taken hold of Gertrude's twisted mind. Pretending to be dissatisfied with her earlier instructions, she explained to Lucia once more the road she had to take, and dismissed her, saying, "Do everything exactly as I said, and come back quickly." Lucia left.

She passed the cloister doors unnoticed and entered the street, her eyes lowered, keeping close to the wall. The Signora's directions and her own recollections helped her find the town gate. She passed through and continued down the main road, focused but trembling slightly, until a few minutes later she recognized the path leading to the monastery. That road used to be, and still is, sunken like a riverbed between two high banks with hedges on either side forming a sort of canopy. As she turned onto it, Lucia saw how isolated it was and felt a growing sense of fear. She started to walk more quickly and was relieved a moment later to see a coach stopped, and next to it, by an open door, two travelers looking around, as if uncertain of the road. When she drew near, she over-

heard one of them say, "Here is a nice young lady who'll give us directions." In fact, when she reached the carriage, the same man, with a manner more noble than his appearance, turned and asked, "Could the young lady tell us the way to Monza?"

"That way, you'd be going in the wrong direction," replied the poor girl. "Monza is this way . . ." and as she turned to point with her finger, the other man (Nibbio) suddenly grabbed her around the waist and lifted her off the ground. Lucia twisted her head back, terrified, and let out a scream. The scoundrel forced her into the coach. A third man, sitting in the front, took her and, no matter how much she struggled and screamed, forced her into the seat facing him. Another trapped her cries in her throat by placing a handkerchief over her mouth. Meanwhile, Nibbio jumped into the coach, too: The door slammed shut and they were off at a gallop.

The man who had asked the perfidious question remained behind. He looked up and down the road, to see if anyone had noticed Lucia's shouts: There was no one. He jumped off to the side, grabbed hold of a tree in the underbrush, and disappeared. He was one of Egidio's henchmen. Feigning disinterest, he had stood at his master's door to see when Lucia left the convent. He had observed her carefully, so he would recognize her, then took a shortcut to wait for her at the appointed spot.

Who could describe her terror, her distress? Who could express what was going through her mind? She opened her frightened eyes wide, anxious to see her awful plight, then closed them immediately, disgusted and terrified by those ghastly faces. She twisted and turned, but was held tight on every side. She gathered all her forces and lunged toward the door repeatedly, but two muscular arms kept her trapped in the back of the carriage, while four other gnarled hands held her in place. Every time she opened her mouth to let loose a scream, it was stifled in her throat by the handkerchief. In the meantime, the three foulmouthed heathens kept repeating, in the most humane voices they could muster, "Quiet, quiet. Don't be afraid, we don't want to hurt you." After a few minutes of an-

guished struggle, she seemed to calm down. Her arms went slack, her head fell back, and her gaze remained frozen through her barely opened eyes. The horrid faces staring back at her seemed to blur and waver in a horrible mix. The color drained from her cheeks. She broke out in a cold sweat, collapsed, and fainted.

"Come now, be brave," said Nibbio. "Be brave, be brave," repeated the other two rogues, but senselessness had spared Lucia the comfort of hearing those horrid voices.

"What the devil? She looks dead," said one of them. "What if she really is?"

"She's not dead!" said the other. "It's one of those fainting spells that women get. Believe me. Every time I've had to send someone, man or woman, to meet their maker, it took a hell of a lot more than that."

"Enough!" said Nibbio. "Stick to your job and don't go looking for trouble. Get your guns out from under the seat and have them ready. The forest we're going through is always crawling with outlaws . . . Not like that, damn it! Hide them behind your backs, pointing up. Can't you see that she's a scared mouse, one of those that faints over nothing? If she sees guns, she really could die on us. And when she comes to, make sure not to scare her! Don't touch her unless I tell you to. In fact, I can handle her by myself. Keep your traps shut: Let me do the talking."

Meanwhile the carriage, still racing ahead, had entered the forest.

After a while, poor Lucia started to regain consciousness, as if waking up from a deep, troubled sleep, and she opened her eyes. She struggled to make out the terrifying figures that surrounded her, and to gather her thoughts. Finally she remembered her awful plight. With the little strength she had left, she immediately threw herself at the door again, hoping to jump out. But she was held back, and was only able to glimpse the wild solitude of the place they were passing through. She let loose another cry, but Nibbio, raising the cruel hand that held the handkerchief, said, "Come

now," as gently as he could, "keep quiet, now, and it'll go better for you. We don't want to hurt you. But if you won't shut up, we'll have to make you shut up."

"Let me go! Who are you? Where are you taking me? Why have you kidnapped me? Let me go, let me go!"

"I'm telling you there's nothing to be afraid of. You're not a child. You should know that we don't want to hurt you. Can't you see that we could have killed you a hundred times over if we had wanted to? So be quiet."

"No, no, let me go on my way. I don't know you."

"But we know you."

"Blessed Virgin Mary! What do you mean you know me? Let me go, for heaven's sake. Who are you? Why have you kidnapped me?"

"Because we were ordered to."

"Who. Who ordered you to?"

"Shut up!" said Nibbio with a scowl. "Enough of your questions!"

Lucia made another sudden lunge for the door. Failing again, she resorted to imploring them, with her head lowered, her voice choking on her tears, and her hands clasped before her lips: "For the love of God, of the Holy Virgin, let me go. What did I ever do to you? I'm a poor creature who's never hurt you. What you've done to me I will forgive from my heart, and I will pray to God for you. But if you have a daughter, a wife, a mother, think of what they would suffer if they were in my situation. Remember that we all have to die, and that one day you will want God to be merciful to you. Let me go. Let me get out of here: The Good Lord will help me to find my way."

"We can't."

"You can't? Oh Lord, what do you mean you can't? Where are you taking me? Why?"

"We can't, don't waste your breath. Don't be afraid, we don't want to hurt you. Stay calm and no one will touch you."

Becoming more distressed, more devastated, and more terrified by the minute, Lucia turned to He who holds the hearts of men in His hand, and, if He so desires, can soften even the hardest of them.

She huddled in the corner of the carriage, crossed her arms over her breast, and prayed to herself. Then, taking out her rosary beads, she began to say the rosary more fervently and emotionally than ever before. Every so often, hoping to be granted the mercy she had implored, she would turn to them to beg again, but always in vain. Then she would faint once more and come to once more, only to relive new torments. My heart cannot bear to describe her ordeal any longer: An overwhelming sorrow makes me skip to the end of that journey, which lasted for more than four hours, after which we will still have some more agonizing hours to endure. Let us go now to the castle where the unhappy girl was being taken.

The Nameless One waited with an unusual agitation and ambivalence. How strange! The same man who had disposed of so many lives in cold blood, who in the midst of so many vile deeds had never stopped to consider the suffering he caused, thinking only of his own savage desire for revenge. Now, in having successfully laid claim to this stranger, this poor peasant girl, he felt a kind of revulsion, almost a terror, I would say. He had been staring for some time at the road that led into the valley from a window high up in his castle. Suddenly, he saw the coach appear, advancing slowly, since its earlier speed had exhausted the horses' energy and depleted their strength. Although from his vantage point it looked like little more than a toy buggy one gives to a child, he recognized it immediately and felt his heart beat faster.

"Will she be in it?" was his first thought. And then, "She's such a nuisance! Let's get rid of her."

He was tempted to summon one of his henchmen to intercept the coach, with orders for Nibbio to turn around and take the girl to the palace of Don Rodrigo. But an imperious "No" that echoed in his mind put an end to that thought. Still tormented by the need to boss someone around, and finding it intolerable to wait idly for the coach that was making its way to him too slowly, treacherously, almost punitively, he sent for an old servant woman.

She had been born in that same castle, the child of a former guard, and had spent her whole life there. Everything she had seen

and heard from the time she was in swaddling clothes had impressed on her mind a grand and terrifying idea of the power wielded by her masters. The main lesson she had learned from her instructions and her experience was to obey them in all things, since they were capable of doing both great harm and great good. The idea of duty, which is deposited like a seed in the hearts of all men, had in her become associated with feelings of deference, terror, and an overweening desire to serve. When the Nameless One became master, and started to make such horrifying use of his power, she had initially felt a certain revulsion as well as an even deeper sense of submission. As time went by, however, she grew accustomed to the constant evidence of her eyes and her ears, and came to see in the strong, unbridled will of such a great lord a kind of fatal justice.

At an early age, she married one of his men who, soon after, during a risky expedition, left his life by the side of the road and left her a widow in the castle. The immediate revenge that the master took gave her a fierce consolation, and increased her pride at being under such protection. Since then, she only rarely set foot outside the castle, and gradually, the only notion of human life that remained in her was the little she had received within its precincts. She was not assigned any particular duties in that den of thieves, merely given the occasional odd job, which gnawed away at her. One time it would be rags to patch, another time a meal to prepare quickly for a man returning from an expedition, and yet another some wounds to dress. The men's orders, reproaches, and even their thanks were peppered with ridicule and obscenities: the usual epithet was "old lady," to which someone always added other adjectives that varied according to status and mood. Prodded from her laziness and provoked into anger—her two dueling passions—she would sometimes return the compliment with words that Satan himself would have liked.

"You see that coach down there," the master said to her.

"Yes, I see it," the old woman responded, jutting out her pointed

chin and squinting with her sunken eyes as if she were trying to force them from their sockets.

"Have a sedan chair prepared at once, get in, and have them carry you down to the Malanotte. Quick, quick, so you get there before the coach. It is moving at a funereal pace. In that coach there is . . . there's supposed to be . . . a girl. If there is, give Nibbio my orders for her to be put in the sedan chair and for him to come up here at once. You stay in the sedan chair with that . . . girl. And when you get back to the castle, take her to your room. If she asks where you're taking her, and whose castle it is, be careful not to . . ."

"I see," said the old woman.

"But," the Nameless One continued, "try to cheer her up."

"What am I supposed to say?"

"What are you supposed to say? Cheer her up, I said. Do you mean to tell me you've reached this ripe old age without knowing how to cheer up a child when needed? Haven't you ever heard of heartache? Haven't you ever been afraid? Don't you know the words that are soothing at times like that? Say those kinds of words to her, figure something out, damn it! Go!"

Once she had left, he stood at the window for a while, staring down at the coach, which was already looking much bigger. Then he looked up at the sun, which, at that moment, was sinking behind the mountain. Then he gazed at the clouds scattered above, which in an instant had turned from brown to the color of fire. He stepped back from the window, closed it, and started pacing up and down the room, as hastily as an impatient traveler.

Chapter 21

The old woman rushed to give orders, brandishing the authority of her master's name, which always made everyone jump to attention, no matter who uttered it, for no one would be so bold as to use the name falsely. She reached the Malanotte shortly before the carriage. As it approached, she descended from the sedan chair, waved to the coachman to stop, and went up to Nibbio, who had poked his head out the window, and whispered the master's orders to him.

As the carriage came to a halt, Lucia woke with a start from the torpor into which she had fallen. She felt her blood run cold, opened her eyes, and looked out the window. Nibbio had stepped away. The old woman leaned her chin against the door, staring at Lucia, and said, "Come along, girl. Come, you poor child. Come with me, I've got orders to treat you well and to cheer you up."

The sound of a woman's voice gave the poor girl momentary comfort and courage, but she immediately sank into a darker fear. "Who are you?" she asked in a trembling voice, staring at the old woman's face with shock.

"Come, come, my poor child," the woman kept repeating. Inferring their master's intentions from the old woman's unusual kindness, Nibbio and the other two tried to cajole their captive into obeying. But Lucia continued to survey her surroundings. Although the strange wild place and the close watch of her guards offered her no hope of rescue, she opened her mouth to scream. But before she could make a sound, Nibbio threatened her with the gag again, so she suppressed her cry, trembling. After a brief struggle, they

grabbed her and forced her into the sedan chair. The old woman climbed in after her. Nibbio told the other two henchmen to follow, and he quickly made his way up the hill to be at his master's beck and call.

"Who are you?" Lucia fearfully asked the strange grotesque face before her. "Why have I been brought here? Where am I? Where are you taking me?"

"I'm bringing you to someone who wants to help you," the old woman replied. "To a great man . . . those who he wants to help are the lucky ones! Lucky you, lucky you. Don't be afraid, don't be so sad; he ordered me to cheer you up. You'll tell him, won't you? That I cheered you up?"

"Who is he? Why? What does he want from me? I don't belong to him. Tell me where I am. Let me go! Tell them to let me go, to take me to a church. Please! You're a woman, too. In the name of the Blessed Virgin . . . !"

In her early years the old woman used to say that sweet and holy name devoutly, but she had not invoked it or even heard it uttered for so long. The words filled the wretch's mind with a strange, slow confusion, like the memory of light in an old man blinded since childhood.

Meanwhile the Nameless One looked down from where he stood at the castle gates. He saw the sedan chair moving very slowly behind the carriage, and in front, at a distance that grew with each passing moment, Nibbio running uphill. When Nibbio reached the top, his master beckoned to follow him into the castle.

"Well?" he said, coming to a stop inside a room.

"Couldn't have gone better," replied Nibbio with a bow, "the signal came on time, and so did the woman. There was no one around, and though she let out a single cry, no one appeared. The coachman was ready, the horses were in excellent shape, and there was no one on the road but . . ."

"But . . . ?"

"But . . . to tell you the truth, I wish you had ordered me to shoot

her in the back, so I wouldn't have had to hear her talk or see her face."

"What? What do you mean?"

"I mean that the whole time, the whole time . . . I pitied her."

"Pity? What do you mean you pitied her? What do you know about pity? What is pity, anyway?"

"I'd never felt it so clearly as I did this time. You see, pity is like fear: If it gets you in its grips, you lose your manhood."

"Let's hear what she did to make you pity her."

"Oh, sir! It went on forever . . . her crying, pleading, the look in her eyes, turning as pale as a ghost. Then sobbing, and pleading again, with such words . . ."

"I don't want her in my house," the Nameless One thought as he listened to Nibbio. "I was a fool to agree to this. But I gave my word, I gave my word. Once she's far from here . . ." He looked up at Nibbio and commanded, "Enough of your pity. Mount your horse, bring along a partner, two if you like, and ride as fast as you can to the home of Don Rodrigo, you know who I mean. Tell him to send . . . but right away, otherwise . . ."

Another even more imperious "*No*" from deep inside stopped him from finishing his sentence. "No," he said resolutely, as if issuing himself the order. "No, go and get some rest. And tomorrow morning . . . you'll do what I tell you to do."

"She's got some devil on her side," he thought once he was alone, his arms folded over his chest. He peered at an area on the floor where the moonlight had come in through a tall window, painting a square of pale light, crisscrossed by the thick grating and divided into even tinier pieces by the small window panes. "Some devil or . . . some angel who's protecting her. To make Nibbio feel pity! . . . Tomorrow morning, tomorrow morning at the crack of dawn, I want her out of here, to meet her fate, and we'll speak no more of her," he went on to himself, as if he was speaking to a naughty boy whom he knew would not obey, "and we'll think no more about her. That idiot Don Rodrigo had better not drop by to pester me with

his thank-yous, because . . . I don't want to hear another word about her. I did him a favor because . . . because I gave him my word. And I gave him my word because . . . I was destined to. But I'll make him pay well for this favor, I will. Now let's see . . ."

He wanted to list the most outrageous things he could demand as payment, almost as punishment, but once again he remembered those words: Nibbio felt pity! "How did she do it?" he continued, distracted by the thought. "I want to see her . . . No, I don't! . . . Yes, I do!"

Going from one room to the next, he found a staircase, groped his way in the dark, and went up to the old woman's room and kicked at the door.

"Who's there?"

"Open up!"

At the sound of his voice, the woman leapt to her feet. The bolt slid through its rings, and the door burst open. From the threshold, the Nameless One cast a glance around and, by the light of a lamp burning on a side table, he could see Lucia huddled on the ground in the corner farthest from the door.

"Who told you to toss her there like a bundle of rags, you old hag?" he barked at the servant with an angry scowl.

"That's where she wanted to sit," the woman answered humbly, "I did everything I could to make her feel better. She can tell you herself; she refused to listen."

"Get up," the Nameless One said to Lucia as he approached her. But the banging on the door, the squeak of its hinges, the appearance of that man, and the sound of his words had filled Lucia with fresh terror, and she shrank even deeper into the corner, burying her face in her hands, motionless except for the trembling of her body.

"Get up, I don't want to hurt you. I might even help," the Nameless One repeated. "Get up!" that same voice intoned, indignant at having to give the same order twice.

As if jolted by her fear, the unhappy girl immediately got up on

her knees, and joined her hands as if a sacred image was before her. She raised her eyes to the face of the Nameless One, then lowered them immediately, saying, "Here I am. Now you can kill me."

"I told you I don't want to hurt you," replied the Nameless One in a softer voice, staring down at a face distraught with heartache and fear.

"Cheer up, cheer up," said the old woman, "if he's telling you he doesn't want to hurt you . . .",

"So why," Lucia continued, her voice shaking with fear but steady in the indignation that rises from despair, "why are you making me suffer the pains of hell? What did I ever do to you?"

"Have you been mistreated? Speak!"

"Mistreated? They took me by trickery, by force! Why? Why did they take me? Why am I here? Where am I? I'm a poor creature: What did I ever do to you? In God's name . . ."

"God, God," the Nameless One broke in, "always on and on about God. Those who haven't got the strength to defend themselves always have this God on their side. As if he'd spoken to them! What do you expect from the word 'God,' anyway? You think it's going to make me . . . ?" and he broke off his sentence.

"Oh, sir! What do I expect? What can a poor girl like me expect? Only your mercy. God will forgive many things for an act of mercy! Let me go, for the love of God, let me go! You, who will also have to face your maker one day: What do you have to gain from causing a poor creature so much suffering? You have the power to give orders: So tell them to let me go! They brought me here by force. Send me with this woman to ***, where my mother lives. Oh Blessed Virgin! My mother! My mother, for goodness' sake, my mother! Perhaps it is not far from here. I saw my mountains! Why are you making me suffer? Tell them to take me to a church. I will pray for you for the rest of my life. What would it cost you to say one word? Ah, yes! I can see that you are moved to pity: Say the word, say it. God will forgive many things for an act of mercy!"

"Why couldn't she be the daughter of one of those dogs that banished me?" the Nameless One thought. "One of those cowards

who wants me dead? Then I could enjoy her whining, and instead . . ."

"Don't reject an inspiration to do good!" Lucia continued fervently, encouraged by the hesitation she could see in her tormentor's face and demeanor. "If you don't do me this kindness, then God shall . . . He will let me die, and then my suffering will be over. But what about you? Maybe one day you, too . . . But no, no. I will always pray to God to deliver you from all evil. What would it cost you to say one word? If you were the one suffering this pain . . ."

"Come now, cheer up," the Nameless One interrupted with a kind voice that astonished the old woman. "Have I hurt you? Have I threatened you?"

"No, you haven't. I can see that you have a good heart, that you feel pity for me, this poor creature. You could terrorize me more than anyone, you could kill me, if you wanted to, and instead you have . . . opened your heart a little. God will reward you for this. Carry out this act of mercy: Free me, free me."

"Tomorrow morning . . ."

"No, free me now, immediately."

"Tomorrow morning we will see, I'm telling you. Come now, cheer up until then. Get your rest. You must be hungry. We'll bring you something to eat now."

"No, no, I'll die if anyone comes in here: I'll die. Take me to church yourself. God will reward you if you do."

"A woman will come by to bring you something to eat," said the Nameless One. After those words, he, too, was dumbfounded that such a thought had crossed his mind, and that he had felt the need to comfort a little peasant girl.

"And you," he continued immediately, turning to the old woman, "encourage her to eat. Make her sleep in this bed. And if she wants your company, fine. Otherwise, it won't kill you to sleep on the floor for one night. Cheer her up, I tell you. Keep her spirits up. And I'd better not hear any complaints about you!"

At that, he moved quickly to the door. Lucia leapt up and ran to hold him back and renew her pleas, but he was already gone.

"Woe is me! Lock the door! Lock it right away!" When she heard the door shut and bolted, she went back to huddling in her corner. "Woe is me!" she exclaimed again, sobbing. "To whom can I turn now? Where am I? Tell me, tell me for goodness' sake, who is that man, the one who spoke to me?"

"Who is he? Who is he? You'd like me to tell you, would you? You'll just have to wait. Now that he's protecting you, you've let it go to your head. And you want an answer, do you, and you want to drag me into it? Well, ask him yourself. If I told you who he was, I wouldn't hear the kind words you just heard from him, believe me. I'm too old for this," she went on, muttering between her teeth, "damn the young girls, who always look so pretty, whether laughing or crying, and who always think they're right." But at the sound of Lucia's sobs, she remembered her master's threatening words. She leaned over the poor huddled girl and added in a gentler voice, "Come now, I didn't say anything bad. Cheer up. Don't ask me to tell you things I can't discuss. Anyway, stop worrying. If only you knew how many people wish he'd speak to them the way he spoke to you! Cheer up now. Something to eat'll be here in a second. And take it from someone who knows: Judging from his tone, it'll be delicious. And then you'll go to bed, and . . . leave a little corner for me, too, I hope," she added in a snippy voice, despite herself.

"I don't want to eat, I don't want to sleep. Leave me alone; don't come near. But don't leave me!"

"No, no, don't worry," said the old woman as she walked away and sat on a rickety chair, glowering at the poor girl with both fear and resentment. Every now and then, she gazed longingly at the comfortable nest she had made, aggravated that she might not be able to settle into it all night, and grumbled about the cold. But she cheered up at the thought of supper and the hope that there would be enough for her, too. Lucia, as if in a trance or a feverish dream, didn't notice the cold, didn't feel hungry, and only vaguely sensed her own suffering and fear.

When someone knocked, she gave a start and raised her terrified face, crying, "Who's there? Who's there? Don't let anyone in!"

"It's no one, no one," said the old woman. "Good news. It's just Marta bringing a bite to eat."

"Lock the door, lock the door!" cried Lucia.

"Right away, right away!" replied the old woman. Taking a basket from Marta's hands, she sent her away, closed the door, and placed the basket on a table in the middle of the room. She begged Lucia repeatedly to come and enjoy the good food, trying to find the right words to get the poor girl to eat, bursting into exclamations of how exquisite the meal was: "Folks like us never get to taste this type of food! We'll remember this for a very long time! This is the wine that the master drinks with his friends when one of them comes by and they want to have a good time! Mmm!" But all her coaxing was in vain. "Since you don't want anything," she grumbled, "don't go telling the master tomorrow that I didn't cheer you up. I'm going to have a bite to eat myself, but there'll be more than enough left over for you when you get your head back on straight and are ready to obey." At this, she started to eat greedily. Once she'd had her fill, she stood up, went to the corner, and hovering over Lucia, invited her once again to eat and then go to bed.

"No, I don't want anything," the girl replied in a faint, drowsy voice. Then, more resolutely, she asked: "Is the door bolted? Bolted securely?" After looking around the room, she stood up, and groping with her hands, walked suspiciously toward the door.

The old woman ran ahead of her, placed her hand over the bolt, and shook it, saying, "Can you hear it? Can you see? Is that secure enough for you? Now are you happy?"

"Me? Happy? Here?" answered Lucia, returning to her corner. "At least God knows where I am!"

"Get in the bed. What are you doing over there in the corner, curled up like a dog? Who ever heard of refusing a little comfort when it's there for the taking?"

"No, no, let me be."

"Suit yourself. Look, I'm leaving you a good spot. I'll sleep on the side. I'll be uncomfortable for your sake. If you want to get into the bed, you know how . . . Remember, I've asked you several times."

With that she slipped under the covers, fully dressed, and silence descended over the room.

Lucia remained motionless in the corner, rolled up into a ball, her face buried in her hands. She was neither asleep nor awake, for her mind was racing through a murky sequence of thoughts, images, and fears. One second she was alert, remembering the horrors she had seen and suffered that day, agonizing over the mysterious and terrifying reality that had engulfed her. The next, her thoughts wandered to an even darker place, struggling with phantoms born of fear and uncertainty. Finally, she stretched her tortured limbs and lay down or rather collapsed into a sleeplike state, more exhausted and depressed than ever. But suddenly, as if an inner voice jolted her awake, she woke, gripped by an unconscious need to be fully alert, think clearly, and find out the where, how, and why of her situation.

A noise made her prick up her ears: It was the slow rattle of the old woman snoring. Lucia opened her eyes and saw a faint light appearing and disappearing. It was the wick of the dying lamp that sputtered out a flickering light and immediately withdrew it, like the ebb and flow of the waves upon the shore. The light illuminated then fled from the objects in the room before she could make out their distinct shapes and colors, offering nothing more than a series of jumbled images to her gaze. But very quickly, she recalled the trappings of the room; her confused senses righted themselves, and the unhappy girl recognized her prison. The memories of the horrible day and her dread of the future came flooding back. New fears replaced any sense of calm she had felt after so much agitation, her brief repose, and her state of abandonment, and she was so overcome with distress that she wanted to die. But in that moment, she remembered that at least she could pray, and suddenly hope leapt into her heart. She picked up her rosary once again and started to say her Hail Marys. As she recited the prayers through trembling lips, her heart was filled with a vague sense of trust.

Suddenly, another thought crossed her mind: Perhaps if she offered a sacrifice in this moment of desolation, an answer to her

prayers might be more likely. In this moment, filled with fear and a desire for freedom, she remembered the one thing that was most important to her in the world, and she immediately resolved to make that offering. She rose to her knees, clasped her hands to her breast, her rosary beads dangling from her fingers, lifted her face toward heaven, and said, "Oh Blessed Virgin! You to whom I have prayed so many times, and who so many times has consoled me! You who have suffered so much pain and are now in glory, and have performed so many miracles for poor troubled souls, help me! Help me to escape from this danger and lead me back to safety with my mother, oh Mother of God, and I vow to you to remain a virgin for the rest of my life, and to renounce my poor love forever, and belong to no one but you."

After uttering these words, she lowered her head and placed the rosary beads around her neck, a sign of consecration, as well as protection, as if she were suiting up in the armor of a new militia into which she had enlisted. Sitting back down on the floor, a sense of tranquility and confidence filled her spirit. She remembered the powerful stranger's words about "tomorrow morning," and in them, found a promise of salvation. As daybreak approached, Lucia fell into a deep uninterrupted sleep, exhausted by her struggle and comforted by new hope with the name of her protectoress still on her lips.

At the same time, someone else in the castle yearned for sleep, but could find no peace. After he had left or rather fled from Lucia, ordered her supper, and made his usual rounds of the castle, the Nameless One—with her vivid image in his mind's eye and her words echoing in his ears—had retreated to his room, quickly locking himself in as if to barricade himself from a squadron of enemies. After undressing just as quickly, he went to bed. But that image, more present than ever, mocked him, as if to say, "No sleep for you tonight."

"Why did you want to see her?" he wondered. "Out of some stupid girlish curiosity? That idiot Nibbio is right: She takes away your manhood . . . And me? . . . Am I no longer a man? Me? What hap-

pened? What the devil got into me? What's different this time? Didn't I already know how women behave? Sometimes men act this way, too, when they can't fight back. What the devil! You'd think I never heard a woman whining!"

And here, without having to dig too deep, his memory retrieved more than one instance when neither prayers nor laments had deterred him from carrying out his intentions. But rather than restoring his determination to execute the task at hand, or extinguishing the pity gnawing at his soul, these memories stirred up a kind of terror, an indistinct rage of repentance in him. So he was relieved to return to that first image of Lucia, which he hoped would restore his courage. "She's alive," he thought, "she's here. It's not too late. I can tell her, 'Go, be happy again,' I can see her expression change. I can even say, 'Forgive me.' . . . Forgive me? Me, ask for forgiveness? From a woman? Me! And yet . . . If a word, a single word, could benefit me, free me from this devilry, then I'd say it! Yes, I would! What is happening to me? I'm not a man anymore!

"Enough!" he said, turning angrily in his bed, which had become hard as a rock, with covers that had become as heavy as lead. "Enough! This isn't the first time such nonsense has passed through my mind. This, too, will pass."

And to make it pass, he tried to think of something important, something that used to keep him occupied, so he could concentrate on that alone, but he found nothing. Everything seemed to have changed: The things that he used to desire the most were no longer desirable in the least; his passion, like a horse that suddenly balks at shadows, refused to take another step. At the thought of business he had begun, but not yet finished, he did not feel driven to complete it, or was irritated by the obstacles standing in the way (it would have been a relief to be irate in that moment!). Instead, he felt sad, almost horrified, at the steps he had already taken. Time appeared before him stripped of all intention, all activity, all desire, filled only with appalling memories. All those hours became one with the hour that was now passing so slowly and weighing on him so heavily.

He imagined all his henchmen lining up before him, but he couldn't think of a single order to give them that mattered. Indeed, the very idea of seeing them again, of finding himself among them, was a new burden, an idea both repugnant and annoying. The only thought that came to him for the next day was to free that poor girl.

"I'll free her, yes, as soon as day breaks, I'll run to her and say, 'Go now, go.' One of my men will accompany you . . . What about my commitment? My word of honor? And Don Rodrigo? . . . Well, who the hell is Don Rodrigo, anyway?"

Like a man caught off guard by an embarrassing, unexpected question from his superior, the Nameless One tried to think of an answer to the question that he, or rather his new self, had posed, rising up all at once, terrifyingly, in judgment of his old self. He tried to understand what had driven him, almost before being asked, to agree to inflict suffering on this unhappy stranger—a girl he neither hated nor feared—as a favor to Don Rodrigo.

Though there were plenty of excuses he could have invented up, he still could not explain to himself what had brought him to that point. His willingness had stemmed not from a deliberation but from an instinct, in obedience to his old habits and the consequence of a thousand previous actions. But as he sought a reasonable explanation for even a single deed, the tormented self-examiner found himself engulfed in an interrogation of his whole life. Back and back he went in time, from year to year, commitment to commitment, bloodshed to bloodshed, crime to crime. In his newly awakened conscience, each crime reappeared stripped of the feelings that had made him want to commit it, and with a monstrosity that those feelings had kept him from seeing. They all belonged to him; they were who he was. The horror of this realization was reborn with each image and joined to all of them, driving him to despair. He sat up in a fury, and reached in a fury toward the wall next to the bed for his pistol and took hold of it, ready to end his unbearable life, in the grips of terror and a lingering apprehension. But then he thought of the future, the days after his death that would continue to flow. With horror, he imagined his mutilated corpse,

lying motionless, left to the mercy of the lowliest survivor. The shock and confusion that would spread throughout the castle the next day, everything upside down, as he remained powerless, speechless, his body tossed who knows where. He imagined the gossip, from near and far, the jubilation of his enemies. The darkness and silence of the night made death seem even more grim and frightening. If he were to have these thoughts in broad daylight before a crowd, he might not hesitate to jump in a river and disappear.

Lost in these tormented contemplations, his twitching thumbs fiddled with his pistol as another thought crossed his mind. "What if the afterlife, the one they assured me was certain when I was a boy, doesn't exist? What if it's an invention of the priests? What should I do then? Why should I die? What does it matter what I've done? What does it matter? I must be crazy to be thinking this . . . but what if, instead, this other life exists?"

This doubt, this possibility, sank him into an even deeper, heavier despair from which there was no escape, not even through death. He dropped the weapon and sat there with his hands in his hair, teeth chattering, his whole body trembling. Suddenly he remembered the words he had heard a few hours earlier: "God will forgive many things for an act of mercy!" Though previously spoken in a humble, prayerful tone, they came to him now ringing with authority and a distant hope. In that moment, he felt relief coursing through his veins. As he regained his composure, he removed his hands from his temples and thought about the person who had said these words. She was no longer his prisoner, or a supplicant, but his guide, dispensing grace and consolation. He anxiously awaited daybreak, so he could run to free her and hear her speak more words of refreshment and life. He imagined escorting her to her mother.

"And then? What will I do tomorrow for the rest of the day? What will I do the day after tomorrow? And during the night, which will return again in twelve hours? Oh, the night! No, no, the night!" Once again falling back into the painful contemplation of an empty future, he wondered in vain how he would use his time, and how he

would get through the days and nights. At first, he imagined abandoning the castle and moving to a distant land where no one knew either him or his name, though he realized his old self would always haunt him. But then a dim hope revived that this was just a temporary delirium, and his old spirit and desires would return. One moment, he dreaded the day, for his people would see how low he had fallen. In the next, he longed for it, in the hope that it would also shed light on his tumultuous thoughts.

At the break of dawn, shortly after Lucia had fallen asleep, while the Nameless One sat motionless, he heard a wave of sound, indistinct but vaguely joyous. Listening carefully, he was able to make out the distant ringing of bells of celebration. A few moments later, he heard the bells echo off the mountain, languidly repeating the tune and harmonizing with it. The festive ringing seemed to be coming closer and closer. "What cause is there for celebration? What do they all have to be so cheerful about?"

He leapt out of his bed of thorns and, half-dressed, ran to open a window and look out. The mountains were partly veiled in fog. The sky was overcast beneath a single ashen cloud. As daylight slowly spread, however, he spotted people walking on a road at the other end of the valley, joined by others coming out of their houses, all heading in the same direction, toward the pass on the right of the castle, dressed in their Sunday best and moving with remarkable enthusiasm.

"What the devil are they up to? What is there to be happy about in this damned town? Where is all this rabble going?" Calling to a trusted bravo sleeping in the next room, he asked what the reason was for all the hubbub. But the man knew as little as he did, and replied that he would go down immediately to find out. The Nameless One continued to lean out the window, riveted by the spectacle moving through the valley. There were men, women, children; some traveling in groups, others in pairs, while some were alone. One man rushed to catch up to the person in front of him, and the two walked together. Another left his house and paired up with the first person he saw, as if they were two friends setting off on a trip

they had planned. Everyone he saw seemed to be united by a common haste and joy. The jarring but harmonious ringing from the various bell towers—some closer, some farther—seemed to articulate the voice underlying those gestures, and provide the words he could not hear from his perch. Filled with something greater than curiosity, he sought to discover what could give such an equal passion to so many different people.

Chapter 22

A few minutes later, the bravo returned and reported that Cardinal Federigo Borromeo, the Archbishop of Milan, had arrived in *** yesterday and would be spending the day. When the people of the surrounding villages heard the news on the eve of his arrival, they were all inspired to come and see him. The bells were ringing, not to inform the people but to celebrate. Left alone, the Nameless One continued to look out at the valley, more pensive than ever. "For one man! Everyone in a rush, everyone joyful, all to see one man! Each of them must be tormented by some demon. But none of them, not one, suffers from a demon like mine! No one has been through a night like mine! What is it about that man that brings so many people such joy? A few coins to hand out here and there? . . . But they can't all be there for charity. What then, a few gestures in the air, a few words . . . Oh, if only he has a few words of consolation for me! If only . . . ! But why shouldn't I go? Why not? . . . I'll go, I will. And I want to speak with him. I want to speak with him in private. What should I say to him? Well, I'll tell him, I'll tell him . . . I'll hear what this man has to say!"

Once he fumbled his way to this decision, he dressed quickly, throwing on a military-style coat. He took the pistol that was still lying on the bed and tucked it into his belt on one side, and on the other, he holstered another gun that had been hanging on a nail in the wall. He stuck his dagger in the same belt, then took down from the wall a carbine, whose notoriety rivaled his own, and slung it around his shoulder. He picked up his hat, left his chamber, and went straight to the room where he had left Lucia. He set the rifle

down in a corner near the door and knocked, calling out at the same time. The old woman leapt out of bed and ran to open the door. The master entered, looked around the room, and spotted Lucia huddled in the corner, motionless.

"Is she asleep?" he asked the old woman in a low voice. "Asleep over there? Were those my orders, you wretch?"

"I did my best," she replied, "but she wouldn't eat, and wouldn't come . . ."

"Let her sleep in peace. Make sure you don't disturb her. And when she wakes up . . . Marta will be in the next room. Send her to get anything the girl requests. When she wakes up . . . tell her that I . . . that the master has gone out for a little while, that he'll be back, and that . . . he'll do whatever she wants."

The old woman couldn't believe her ears, thinking, "What is she, some kind of a princess?"

The master left, picked up his rifle, told Marta to wait in the next room, and sent the first bravo he encountered to stand guard, so that no one except her would set foot inside the room. Then he left the castle and headed down the hill at a run.

The manuscript does not mention the distance between the castle and the village where the Cardinal was staying, but judging from the events I am about to relate, it could not have been more than a long walk. We know this not only from the influx of people from the valley and even farther away, but also because the memoirs of that period record that crowds used to come from twenty miles away or more to see Federigo.

The bravi who encountered him on their way up the hill stopped respectfully to let their master pass, waiting to see if he had any orders or if he wanted them to accompany him on some expedition. They didn't know what to make of his manner, or his glaring in response to their bows.

When he got to the main road, the passersby were amazed to see him without his customary escort. Nevertheless, each of them stepped to the side, leaving enough space for one, and doffed their hats in deference. In the village, he encountered a large crowd, but

as his name traveled from mouth to mouth, the crowd opened up to let him pass. He approached one man and asked where the Cardinal might be. "At the parish priest's," the man replied with a bow, pointing out its location. The Nameless One headed in that direction and entered a small courtyard filled with priests, all of whom eyed him with surprise and suspicion. Directly across the yard, he saw an open door that led to a sitting room where many other priests had congregated. He slipped off his rifle, leaned it against the wall in a corner, and entered the room. There, too, he was greeted by stares, whispers of his name, then silence. Turning to one of the priests, he asked where the Cardinal was, saying he wished to speak with him.

"I'm not from around here," the priest answered. He looked around the room and called out to the Cardinal's chaplain and crossbearer, who was sitting in a corner and whispering to a colleague, "Him? The notorious one? What's he doing here? Keep your distance!" But when the chaplain heard his name echoing in the silent room he had to come forward. He bowed to the Nameless One, listened to his request, glanced quickly at his face with an uneasy curiosity before looking down again, then stood still for a moment and said, or rather stammered, "I wouldn't know whether His Grace . . . at this moment . . . is . . . maybe . . . could . . . Anyway, I'll go see." And reluctantly, he went to convey the message to the Cardinal in the next room.

At this point in our story, I cannot resist lingering for a moment, like a sad and weary wayfarer who has traveled through an arid and wild landscape, and stops to kill a little time lying in the grassy shade of a nice tree near a freshwater spring. Because here we meet a character whose name and memory has the capacity to revive our spirits with peaceful reverence and joyful affection, particularly now, after we have witnessed so much pain and contemplated such manifold and appalling depravity. I absolutely must say a few words about this character, but if any of you would rather not hear them, and instead prefer to continue on with the story, you are welcome to skip to the next chapter.

Born in 1564, Federigo Borromeo was one of those rare men of any era who dedicated great intellect, the resources of his vast wealth, all the advantages of a privileged status, and an unwavering sense of purpose in seeking out and practicing good. His life was like a clean brook that springs from a cliff, running along a path through various landscapes and then emptying, still clear, into the river, without ever becoming stagnant or muddy. Though he grew up surrounded by luxury and splendor, he also learned about sacrifice and humility, the vanity of earthly pleasure, the injustice of pride, and the true dignity and riches that, heartfelt or not, are passed down from one generation to the next through the most basic teachings of religion. He heeded those words and lessons. He took them seriously, tested them, and found them to be true. Though other words and lessons that opposed his beliefs were also passed from generation to generation, with the same certainty and often from the same lips, he realized that they could not be true. So he resolved to let the truth be the guide of all his thoughts and deeds. Convinced that life was not predestined to be a burden for the many and a feast for the few, but rather a task for all, for which all must answer, he sought ways to make his own life more purposeful and saintly from an early age.

In 1580, he made public his decision to dedicate himself to the priesthood, and was ordained by his cousin Carlo, who by long and universal acclaim was already considered destined for sainthood. Soon after, Federigo enrolled in the college his cousin had founded in Pavia, which still bears the family name. He applied himself assiduously to his prescribed duties, and also took on two more responsibilities: teaching Christian doctrine to the poor and forsaken, and visiting, serving, consoling, and caring for the sick. He used his conferred authority to persuade his colleagues to join him in his work. He led by example with honesty and generosity, as if destined to become a leader, regardless of the nobility of his birth. In fact, he did not seek and even studiously avoided any of the advantages his status could have granted him. He kept a table that was poor, not frugal, and clothing that was poor, not plain, in keeping

with his general tenor and behavior. Though some of his relatives felt his behavior was debasing the family name, he never considered changing. When tutors attempted to sneak little luxuries to him, treating him like a prince, he resisted, and even waged war on them. Perhaps they thought they could win him over with time; or they believed that their sycophancy would be rewarded through reflected splendor; or they were those prudent souls that recoil equally from virtue and vice, always preaching that perfection lies in the middle, where they themselves felt most comfortable. But these attempts did not fool Federigo, and though he was still between boyhood and adolescence, he reprimanded all who attempted such gestures.

It is no surprise, then, that Federigo modeled his own behavior after that of his superior, Cardinal Carlo, his senior by twenty-six years, whose grave, solemn presence was living proof of his saintliness, a constant reminder of his works, a man whose authority was increased, as if it were needed, by the open, spontaneous praise of those who surrounded him, whoever and however many they were. What is surprising, however, is that when Federigo was only twenty years old, and Carlo died, no one noticed that he had lost his guide and conscience. His intellect, piety, relationships with other powerful cardinals, and his family's status (now also considered the epitome of saintly leadership, thanks to Carlo) made Federigo a likely candidate for promotion to a high office in the Church. But he was deeply convinced of something that no one who professes Christianity can legitimately deny. The Church teaches that no man is superior to other men, except in serving them. He feared higher office, not because he spurned serving others—few lives have been as dedicated to others as his—but because he considered himself unworthy and incapable of such high and perilous service. So when in 1595 Clement VIII offered him the archbishopric of Milan, he was taken aback, and refused without hesitation. At the express order of the Pope, however, he accepted.

As we all know, such demonstrations of humility are neither difficult nor rare. Besides, hypocrisy requires no more ingenuity to

profess such demonstrations than mockery does to deride them. But does this mean they cannot be the natural expression of a wise and virtuous sentiment? The way one lives is the proof of principles professed in words. Even if the words that express these sentiments come from the lips of all the impostors and all the jesters in the world, they will always be beautiful when they are preceded or followed by a life of selflessness and sacrifice.

Archbishop Federigo engaged in a constant, singular effort to use for his own person only the finances, time, and care that were strictly necessary. He would repeat the age-old saying that the Church's revenues are the patrimony of the poor. The following examples show how he lived by this creed.

He commissioned an estimate of his personal and household expenses. When he discovered that they amounted to six hundred scudi (*scudo* is the gold coin of the same weight and value as what would later be called the *zecchino*), he ordered that all household expenses should henceforth be paid from his personal assets, for he felt it was wrong for a wealthy man like himself to live off the Church. He was such a frugal and parsimonious administrator of his own needs that he never threw away an article of clothing until it was completely threadbare. As his contemporaries noted, he combined a taste for simplicity with exquisite cleanliness: two remarkable habits in such a dirty and gaudy era. Likewise, he ensured that no leftovers from his frugal meals would go to waste and donated them to the hospice for the poor; by his order, a resident came to his dining room every day to collect whatever remained.

These concerns might lead you to imagine a stingy, miserly, petty virtue, a mind fixated on minutia and incapable of higher projects. But then, there is the existence of the Biblioteca Ambrosiana. Federigo conceived and built it from the ground up, energetically and with courageous munificence. He stocked it with books and manuscripts. In addition to donating his own collection, which he had assembled with great trouble and expense, he sent eight of the most cultivated experts he could find to purchase books throughout Italy, France, Spain, Germany, Flanders, Greece, Leba-

non, and Jerusalem. In this way he managed to gather approximately three thousand printed volumes and fourteen thousand manuscripts. He added a college of scholars to the library. (Nine at first, whose salaries he paid while he was alive. After he died, they were reduced to two, since the ordinary revenues could not cover the cost.) They were tasked with cultivating various studies—theology, history, literature, the ancient Church, and Oriental languages—with the requirement that each of them publish works on their assigned subject matter. He also added what he called the trilingual college, for the study of Greek, Latin, and Italian, and a secondary school where students were instructed in these subjects and languages, so that one day they could teach them themselves. He also added a printing press for Oriental languages, namely Hebrew, Chaldean, Arabic, Persian, and Armenian; a painting gallery, a sculpture gallery, and a school for the three main design arts. For these fields he was able to find trained professors. For the others, we have seen the lengths to which he had gone to collect books and manuscripts; it must have been much harder to find the typefaces for those languages, which at the time were less cultivated in Europe than they are today. It was even harder to find the men. Eight of the nine scholars he hired were young seminarians, which indicates Federigo's opinion of the scholarship and the reputations made during that period. Posterity seems to have confirmed his judgment, by consigning the work and reputations of those scholars to the trash heap of history.

The regulations that he established for the use and administration of the library demonstrate his hope that it would remain in use for years to come, which is not only a beautiful aspiration, but in many respects ahead of its time in wisdom and nobility. He instructed the librarian to correspond with the most learned men in Europe, gather news from them of the latest science as well as advice on the best books coming out in every field, and acquire them. Then, he was to inform scholars about useful books they might not know about, and provide each person—citizens and foreigners alike—with the opportunity and time to use the library according

to their needs. Nowadays, that might seem obvious and innate to the function of a library, but during that time, it was not. In a history of the Ambrosiana, Pierpaolo Bosco, the librarian after Federigo's death, wrote (using the syntax and elegance common to that century) how unique it was that a library built by a private individual, and almost entirely at his own expense, would allow the public to browse and borrow from its collection. Visitors were also offered a place to sit, as well as paper, pen, and inkpot, so they could take any notes they needed. In contrast, other renowned public libraries of Italy locked their books in cabinets rather than put them on display; librarians only removed them as a favor afforded to a precious few. No one ever thought that scholars might want the opportunity to study them. If one was to endow such a library, it meant that you were essentially removing books from circulation, a style of cultivation that leaves a field barren, and unfortunately continues to happen all too often.

Do not ask the effects of Borromeo's foundation on public culture: In two sentences you could show whether they were miraculous or nonexistent. But it would be laborious, useless, and inappropriate to try to explain them here. Just consider what a generous, judicious, benevolent, persevering lover of human improvement he must have been to create such opportunities, despite the ignorance, inertia, and general antipathy toward scholarly pursuits that were common at the time. The protests of "What does it matter?" "This is how he spends his money?" "What an idea!" and "That's all we needed," probably far surpassed the expenses of his undertakings: approximately one hundred and five thousand scudi, almost all of which came from his own pocket.

But to simply call him supremely charitable and generous does not even scrape the surface of how much he spent in emergency relief to the needy. There may still be some who think that such expenditures—I was about to say all expenditures, really—are the best and most useful form of charity. But Federigo considered true charity his primary duty, and here, as in all else, his actions were

consistent with these convictions. He gave generously to the poor throughout his life, but particularly during the famine that our story has already described. From this period, I have the opportunity to report some episodes that illustrate the wisdom and kindness that characterized his charitable giving.

His biographers have noted many unique examples of his virtues, but here I will mention only one. When he learned that a nobleman had used tricks and coercion to force his daughter to become a nun, despite her wish to get married, he summoned the father. And when he got him to admit that the true reason for that persecution was that he did not have the four thousand scudi needed to arrange a suitable (in his opinion) marriage for his daughter, Federigo provided her with the money. Some may consider this to be overly generous, ill-considered, and too indulgent of the foolish whims of an arrogant man; there must be a hundred better ways to spend four thousand scudi. I have no reply except to say that I wish there were more instances of philanthropy so unrestrained by public opinion (every era has its own), so independent of general trends, as in this case of a man inspired to give four thousand scudi to prevent a young girl from becoming a nun against her will.

His tireless charity stood out not only in his generosity, but also in his manner. He was welcoming to all, and believed everyone deserved a friendly face and loving kindness, especially those considered to be of low birth, particularly since they received so little human warmth. Here, too, he had to contend with the gentlemen who believed in *ne quid nimis*—"nothing in excess"—who preferred to keep him within limits, that is to say, within their own limits in all things. Once, during a visit to a remote mountain village, Federigo was teaching a group of poor children and he would lovingly pat them on the head between his questions and instructions. One such gentleman advised him to keep his distance from these "dirty and disgusting" children: as if the good man supposed that Federigo did not have the foresight or sense to come to such a refined realization himself. In certain times and matters, men holding

higher offices have a singular misfortune: While they will rarely find someone who will advise them of their faults, there is no shortage of brave men ready to criticize their good deeds. Not without some animus, the good Bishop replied, "Their souls are in my care, and they may never see my face again. Don't you think they deserve my tenderness?"

These moments of irritation were rare, however, and he was widely admired for his gentle manners and imperturbable calm, which many attributed to his extraordinarily happy temperament. This was the result of the constant governing of a sharp and temperamental disposition. The only times he was severe or indeed harsh was when the priests working under him were guilty of greed, negligence, or other sins contrary to their noble calling. In matters of his own interests or earthly glory, he never expressed any indication of joy, regret, enthusiasm, or agitation: which was admirable if he did not feel these impulses in his heart, and even more so if in fact he did. At the many papal conclaves he attended, he developed the reputation of never aspiring to that post so coveted by the ambitious and so dreaded by the pious. Once, however, when a very influential colleague came to offer him his vote and that of his faction (an ugly word, but that's the term they used), Federigo rejected the proposal so vehemently that the colleague dropped all thought of it and turned elsewhere. This same modesty and aversion to power was equally apparent in the everyday moments of his life. When his duties forced him to organize and govern, he was cautious and tireless, always avoiding meddling in the affairs of others. Even when others requested his involvement, he used discretion and restraint, which was uncommon among men like Federigo, who zealously pursue the good.

If I were to indulge in summarizing the remarkable features of his character, I would almost certainly describe a unique combination of seemingly opposite and irreconcilable qualities. But allow me to note another unique aspect of his beautiful life. Although most of it was filled with activity, administration, functions, teach-

ing, audiences, diocesan visits, travels, and controversies, his studies occupied no small part of his time: as much, in fact, as a professional man of letters. And among his many different claims to fame, his contemporaries also considered him a scholar.

We should not overlook, however, his strong conviction and long practice of ideas that many would find rather strange and baseless nowadays.* I say this even to those who are eager to justify them. Anyone who wishes to defend him tends to argue, most commonly, that these beliefs were errors of his time rather than his own. This argument might be valid, in some cases, after a detailed examination of the facts, but it is meaningless if people adopt it randomly and out of context, as they usually do. And since I do not wish to solve complicated questions with simple answers, or prolong a single episode, I will forgo explaining it. All I will say is that we cannot expect perfection, even in the most admirable of men; if we do, we might as well write a eulogy.

Some of my readers might be wondering—and not be insulted by my assumption—whether this man of such intellect and learning bequeathed some monument to posterity. Indeed he did! He left behind about one hundred volumes, both long and short, Latin and Italian, printed and in manuscript. All of his moral treatises and sermons, as well as dissertations on history, sacred and profane antiquity, literature, the arts, and other subjects, are stored in the library he founded.

"And how come," my readers might ask, "so many works are forgotten, little known, or so seldom studied? How can a man of such intellect, learning, experience of men and the world, introspection, passion for beauty and the good, candor, and so many other qualities of a great writer not have left—among these hundred volumes—a single one considered praiseworthy, even by people who might disapprove of his other works, a single title that is known, even by

* The Cardinal believed in astrology, demonology, and witchcraft, and had some poor souls condemned to the stake.

people who might not read the book? How could all the writing he produced not be enough, collectively, to earn him literary fame among posterity?"

This is undoubtedly a reasonable question, and raises a very interesting issue. The observation of some general facts would yield the reasons for this phenomenon and help to explain other similar occurrences. But those reasons would be many and long-winded. And what if they were not to your liking? Or they made you turn up your nose? So rather than gossiping about this man, let us pick up our story where we left off, so we can see him in action, following the guidance of our author.

Chapter 23

While awaiting the hour to go to church and celebrate the Mass, Cardinal Federigo was reading a book—his usual habit in his spare time—when the chaplain came in with an odd look on his face.

"A strange visitor, Your Grace, truly strange!"

"Who is it?" asked the Cardinal.

"None other than ***," answered the chaplain, emphasizing each syllable as he uttered the name (which I cannot share with my readers), adding, "He's outside. In person. And he is requesting nothing less than an audience with Your Grace."

"He is?" said the Cardinal, his face suddenly animated. He closed his book and stood up from his chair. "Show him in! Show him in at once!"

"But," replied the chaplain without moving, "Your Grace should know who he is: He's a criminal, the notorious . . ."

"And should a bishop not feel blessed that a man like him suddenly wants an audience?"

"But," insisted the chaplain, "we're never allowed to talk about certain matters, because Your Grace says it's nothing but gossip. But when the situation arises, I think it's my duty. After all, zealousness will earn you enemies, Your Grace, and we know for a fact that more than one criminal has threatened that sooner or later—"

"And have they?" interrupted the Cardinal.

"I'm saying he's a murderer, an outlaw, who's in league with the meanest outlaws a man who might have been sent—"

"This is a strange form of protocol," Federigo interrupted again

with a smile. "Are the soldiers urging their general to be afraid?" Then, turning serious and pensive, he continued, "San Carlo would never have hesitated to receive such a man: He would have gone to him himself! Show him in at once; he's waited too long as it is."

The chaplain left, muttering, "It's hopeless: These saints are all so stubborn!"

As he opened the door and returned to the room where the Nameless One and others were gathered, he saw the priests huddled to one side of the room, whispering and casting furtive glances at the visitor, who was standing alone on the other side of the room. The chaplain headed toward the man, sizing him up furtively, and wondering what kind of arsenal was concealed beneath his coat. And whether, before showing him in, he really should have asked . . . but he couldn't bring himself to do it. He went up to him and said, "His Grace awaits your Lordship. Please follow me." He led him through the small crowd, which immediately parted to let them pass, casting glances to the right and to the left as if to say, "What do you expect? Don't you realize that Federigo always does everything his own way?"

The moment the Nameless One entered the room, Federigo went over to him with an eager and serene face, arms open wide, as he would for a welcome guest. He then gestured for the chamberlain to leave, which he did.

The two men stood there for a few moments without speaking, each hesitating for different reasons. The Nameless One had been driven there by an inexplicable urge rather than a specific purpose. He was torn between two opposing passions: a vague longing to be relieved of his inner torment, and a feeling of shame and aggravation to have come before the Cardinal like a penitent, subdued and abject, to confess his guilt and beg forgiveness from another man. He couldn't find or almost search for the right words to say. Still, as he raised his eyes to the man before him, he was pierced by a feeling of veneration both powerful and soothing that, while building his trust, lowered his contempt, and, without directly attacking his pride, still crushed it, and, I would say, forced him into silence.

Federigo's presence was, in fact, the kind that conveys superiority yet inspires love. He carried himself in a manner that was both natural and almost unconsciously majestic, neither stooped nor wasted by age. His eyes were grave and lively, his forehead serene and pensive. Despite his white hair and pallor—the marks of a life of abstinence, meditation, and toil—he had a kind of virginal glow. From his facial features one could see that, in his youth, he must have been what is properly considered handsome. But the habit of solemn and benevolent thought, the inner peace of a long life, the love of humanity, and the constant joy of an ineffable hope, had replaced it with what I would almost call the beauty of old age, highlighted by the magnificent simplicity of his purple cassock.

For a few moments, the Cardinal trained on the Nameless One his penetrating gaze, long experienced in deciphering thoughts from appearances. He sensed that beneath the man's dark and troubled face there was something close to the hope he himself had felt at the announcement of this visit. "Oh!" he said enthusiastically, "This is such a precious visit! And I am so grateful to you for the good decision to undertake it, although I am somewhat at fault."

"At fault!" exclaimed the lord, amazed but also comforted by the Cardinal's words and his manner, and relieved that the Cardinal had broken the ice.

"Yes, of course I'm at fault," continued the other, "for I made you come to me, when I should have been the one to come to you long ago."

"You? To me? Don't you know who I am? Are you sure you heard my name correctly?"

"My joy must be showing on my face! Do you think I would feel this way at the announcement—at the sight—of a stranger? You are the one who makes me feel this; you, as I said, whom I should have sought; you, whom I have so loved and grieved for, whom I have so prayed for; you, of my children, all of whom I dearly love, the one I should have most wanted to welcome and embrace, if I had believed I could hope for it. But God alone can perform miracles. He alone can make up for the weakness and sloth of his poor servants."

The Nameless One stood there in silence, dumbstruck and overcome with emotion.

"What's wrong?" Federigo continued, even more affectionately. "You are here to bring me good news. Why are you so reluctant to tell me?"

"Good news? Me? The fires of hell are burning in my heart! I should have good news for you? Tell me, please, if you can, what good news you could expect from a man like me?"

"That God has touched your heart, and wants to make you one of His own," replied the Cardinal calmly.

"God! God! God! If only I could see him! If only I could hear him! Where is this God?"

"You are asking me? You? Who is closer to Him than you? Don't you feel Him in your heart, weighing on you, disturbing you, never leaving you a moment's peace? Don't you feel Him drawing you in, holding before you the hope, in His tranquility and joy, for a joy that will be even more complete and immense the moment you recognize Him, confess your sins, and pray to Him?"

"Of course I do! Something is weighing on me, eating at me! But is it God? If this God exists, if He is who they say He is, what would God want with me?"

These words were uttered with a pang of despair, but Federigo replied in a voice that was solemn yet serene. "What would God want with you? With you? He can make you into an instrument of His power and goodness! He can attain a glory through you that no one else could give Him. Although many in the world have long condemned you, and thousands upon thousands detest your actions"—for a moment the Nameless One was startled, astonished to hear himself criticized so openly, and even more astonished to feel relieved rather than indignant—"and what glory," Federigo continued, "would they bring to God? Theirs are the voices of fear, voices of self-interest, calling out, perhaps, for justice, but a type of justice too easy, too obvious! And some of these voices, unfortunately, may envy your wretched power, your—until now—deplorable self-assurance. But if you yourself stand up to condemn the life you

have led, to accuse yourself, well then, there will be glory to God! And you ask what use God may have for you? Who am I, a poor mortal, to tell you how you can benefit the Lord? What can He do with your impetuous will, your unshakable constancy, after He has reawakened your will and inflamed it with love, hope, and repentance? Who are you, poor mortal, to think the evil you plot and commit is greater than God's ability to make you desire and strive for the good? You ask what God can do with you? He can forgive you! Save you! Redeem you! Are these things not magnificent and worthy of him? Just think! If I—weak, miserable, though proud man that I be—am so consumed by your health now that I would gladly sacrifice the few days I have left on this earth (as God is my witness), then imagine the greatness of His love, He who infuses my own imperfect but ardent love. Imagine how He loves and wants you, He who commands and inspires in me an all-consuming love for you."

As these words left his lips, his face, his expression, and his every gesture radiated with their meaning. His listener's face in turn changed from upset and agitated to stunned and intent, and then settled into a deeper calm. Eyes that had not shed a tear since childhood welled up. And when the Cardinal's speech ended, the Nameless One gave his final and most unguarded response: He covered his face with his hands and began to sob uncontrollably.

"God is good, God is great!" exclaimed Federigo, raising his eyes and his hands to the heavens, "What have I ever done, I, your worthless servant, your sleeping shepherd, to deserve an invitation to this banquet of grace, to witness this joyful miracle?" As he spoke, he reached out for the hand of the Nameless One.

"No!" cried the latter. "No! Away from me, away! Do not defile your innocent and generous hand. You do not know the things that my hand has done."

"Allow me," said Federigo, taking it firmly but affectionately, "allow me to grasp this hand that will right so many wrongs, spread so much good, soothe so many of the afflicted, and reach out—unarmed, peaceful, and humble—to so many enemies."

"This is too much!" sobbed the Nameless One. "Leave me, Your Grace. Good Federigo, leave me be. A crowd of people is waiting for you. All good people, all innocent, many of whom have come from far away to see or hear you just this once. And yet you keep them waiting . . . to be with me!"

"Let us leave the ninety-nine sheep," replied the Cardinal, "they are safe on the mountain. Now I wish to spend some time with the one that went astray.* Those other souls may be even happier than if they had seen this poor bishop. Perhaps God, who has performed the miracle of mercy in you, is filling them at this very moment with a joy that they do not yet understand. They may already be with us without realizing it. Perhaps the Holy Spirit has instilled in their hearts a vague yearning to give love, a prayer for you, a prayer of thanksgiving of which you are the unknown recipient."

As he spoke, he embraced the Nameless One, who, after trying to resist and pull away for a moment, surrendered, as if overcome by that impulse of love. He embraced the Cardinal in turn, and let his trembling, altered face fall to the other man's shoulder. His burning tears landed on the untainted purple tunic of Federigo, whose guiltless hands affectionately clasped his fingers and patted a coat accustomed to bearing the weapons of violence and treachery.

The Nameless One slipped out of the embrace, covered his eyes with one hand, and, turning his face upward, exclaimed, "God truly is great! God truly is good! Now I know myself; I understand who I am. My sins stand before me, and I am filled with self-loathing. And yet . . . and yet I feel refreshed by a joy . . . yes, a joy that I have never before felt in my whole horrible life!"

"God is giving you a taste of that joy to draw you into his service," Federigo said, "to give you a new life that you will enter into resolutely, a new life in which you will have so much to undo, to repair, to regret!"

* According to the book of Matthew: "If a man have a hundred sheep, and one of them be gone astray, doth he not leave the ninety and nine, and goeth into the mountains, and seeketh that which is gone astray?" (18:12).

"I am such a wretch!" exclaimed the nobleman. "There are so many, so many things that I can only regret! But there is one deed, at least, that I have only just begun, that, if nothing else, I can interrupt, undo, and repair."

Federigo listened attentively. In even stronger words of loathing than I have used, the Nameless One briefly described the outrages Lucia had suffered, how the poor girl's terrors, anguish, and pleas had sent him into a frenzy, and how she was still at the castle . . .

"We have no time to waste!" exclaimed Federigo, gasping with piety and concern. "You are blessed! This is a token of God's forgiveness! He is allowing you to become an instrument of salvation for the very person you had sought to ruin. May God bless you! Indeed, He already has! Do you know where this poor tormented soul is from?"

He gave the name of Lucia's village.

"That's not far from here," said the Cardinal, "praise God; and perhaps . . ." As he spoke, he ran to a side table and shook a bell. In came the chaplain, with a worried look on his face. He cast a glance at the Nameless One and noticed his altered expression and reddened eyes. Then, he looked at the Cardinal, in whom he sensed a solemn happiness and impatient haste beneath his unflappable exterior. The chaplain stood there, slack-jawed and astonished, until the Cardinal brought him back to earth, asking whether the pastor of *** was present among the priests gathered outside.

"He is, Your Grace," replied the chaplain.

"Send him in at once," said Federigo, "together with the local priest."

The chaplain left and returned to the room where the priests were assembled. All eyes turned to him. With his mouth still agape, his face still painted with astonishment, he waved his hands in the air, calling, "Gentlemen! Gentlemen! *Haec mutatio dexterae Excelsi*—Here is the right hand of the Most High!" And he stood there for a moment, saying nothing more. Then, resuming his official tone and voice, he added, "His Most Illustrious and Reverend Eminence wishes to see the local pastor as well as the parish priest of ***."

The first man came forward at once; at the same time, a lone "Me?" mumbled and tinged with disbelief, emerged from the crowd.

"Are you not the pastor of ***?" asked the chaplain.

"One and the same, but . . ."

"His Most Illustrious and Reverend Archbishop wishes to see you."

"Me?" that voice repeated, the monosyllable clearly asking, "What's this got to do with me?" But this time, emerged the man together with the voice: Don Abbondio in person, with a hesitant step and a face both stunned and disgruntled. The chaplain gestured to him, as if to say, "Come along, what's taking you so long?" then, leading the way, he went to the door, opened it, and ushered in the two priests.

The Cardinal let go of the Nameless One's hand, having concluded their arrangements. He stepped away and gestured to the local priest to approach. He told him the story briefly, and asked the priest whether he couldn't immediately find a good matron to travel in a sedan chair to the castle to fetch Lucia: a woman with a good heart and a good head, who would know how to behave on such an unusual mission—the most appropriate manners to adopt, and how to find the most suitable words, to hearten and calm the poor girl for whom, after so much distress and turmoil, being released might prove even more upsetting. After giving it a moment's thought, the priest said he had just the right person, and left. With another gesture the Cardinal summoned the chaplain, whom he ordered to arrange immediately for the sedan chair and chairmen, and to have two mules saddled. Once the chaplain had left, the Cardinal turned to Don Abbondio.

The priest was already standing near him, in order to keep his distance from the nobleman on the other side of the room. He cast a furtive glance at first one man, then the other, wondering what all the fuss was about. He then made a slight bow to the Cardinal, saying, "I have been informed that Your Grace wishes to see me, but I believe there has been a mistake."

"No, there hasn't," replied Federigo. "I have some good news for

you, as well as a gratifying and most pleasant errand. One of your parishioners, Lucia Mondella, whom you must have thought was lost for good, has been found. She's near here, in the home of this dear friend of mine. I want you to go with him now; bring with you the woman that the local priest has gone to find. That is, you are to go to fetch your parishioner and accompany her back here."

It was all Don Abbondio could do to hide how annoyed, irritated, and bitter this proposal—this order—had made him. With no time to compose his face or wipe away the frown that had already formed on it, he hid his feelings by bowing his head in a gesture of obedience. He then raised his head and made a deep bow to the Nameless One, with a pitiful look as if to say: "I am in your hands, have mercy on me: *Parcere subjectis*—spare the defeated!"*

The Cardinal asked him whether Lucia had any relatives.

"If you mean close relatives with whom she lives or has lived, she only has her mother," replied Don Abbondio.

"And is she home?"

"Yes, Your Grace."

"Considering," Federigo continued, "that the poor girl cannot go straight home, I'm sure she would be overjoyed to see her mother immediately. So, if the local priest is not back before I go to church, please tell him to order a cart or a saddle horse and send a sensible man to look for the mother and bring her here."

"And if I were to go?" asked Don Abbondio.

"No, no. Not you. I've already given you something else to do," replied the Cardinal.

"I meant," pursued Don Abbondio, "to prepare her poor mother. She's a very sensitive woman, and it would be best for her to be informed by someone who knows her, and knows how to handle her, in order to avoid doing more harm than good."

"Which is why I'm asking you to tell the local priest who would be the right person for the job. You are needed elsewhere," replied

* *Parcere subjectis,* "spare the defeated," is a quote from the *Aeneid* of Virgil (VI:853), at the conclusion of Anchises's speech about the destiny of Rome.

the Cardinal. And he wanted to add, "After what the poor girl has gone through, hours and hours of anguish in that castle, not knowing what further horrors lie before her, she needs to see a familiar face, someone she trusts." But he did not want to be so blunt in the presence of the Nameless One. It did seem odd to the Cardinal, however, that Don Abbondio had not already come to the same conclusion as himself. His alternative proposal and insistence seemed so inappropriate that he suspected something behind them. He studied the priest's face and could easily perceive the man's fear of traveling with someone as intimidating as the Nameless One and entering his castle even for a few minutes. Wanting to dispel that shadow of cowardice, but not wanting to pull the priest to one side and whisper to him in private while his new friend looked on, the Cardinal thought it best to do what he would have done anyway: speak directly to the Nameless One and hope that the man's replies would make Don Abbondio realize that he was no longer to be feared. So, with that spontaneous familiarity that characterizes both a strong new friend and an old intimate, the Cardinal went over to the Nameless One and said, "Don't go thinking that we're done for today. You will come back, right? In the company of this good priest?"

"Will I be back?" replied the Nameless One. "Even if you rejected me, I would still remain stubbornly at your door, like a beggar. I need to speak with you! I need to hear you, to see you! I need you!"

Federigo took his hand, saying, "So you won't mind staying for dinner with us. I'll be waiting here for you. In the meantime, I am going to pray, and offer up thanks with my people, while you go to gather the first fruits of divine mercy."

Hearing this exchange, Don Abbondio was like a scared child watching a man safely patting his big, growling hound and hearing him say that the animal, with its bloodshot eyes and reputation for biting and terror, is a nice doggy, good boy, good boy. The child looks at the master and neither agrees nor disagrees with him. But he looks at the dog, and doesn't dare go near, for fear that the pooch

will bare its teeth, maybe even take a bite out of him. At the same time, he doesn't dare retreat, in case people notice. But in his heart, he says, "If only I were home!"

As the Cardinal prepared to leave, still holding the Nameless One's hand, he noticed the look still on the face of the poor priest, who hung back, mortified, unhappy, and frowning despite himself. Thinking that maybe he was unhappy because he felt left in a corner and ignored, especially compared to the warm welcome accorded to a violent criminal, the Cardinal stopped for a second, and, turning to him with a loving smile, said, "Reverend Father, you are always with me in the house of the Lord, but this man, 'He was lost and now he is found.'"*

"I couldn't be happier!" said Don Abbondio, bowing with equal reverence to both men.

At that, the Archbishop pushed gently on the door. Two footmen manning the other side of the door immediately opened it, and the unusual pair appeared before the curious eyes of the assembled clergy, who witnessed two faces, each flush with different but equally profound emotions: a grateful tenderness and humble joy in the venerable Federigo, while in the Nameless One, a confusion tempered by relief, and a new shame, a compunction, which did not entirely conceal the vigor of his savage and wrathful nature. More than one observer would later remark how they were reminded of the verses from the book of Isaiah: "The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, and the lion shall eat straw like the ox" (65:25). They were followed by Don Abbondio, whom no one even noticed.

When they had reached the middle of the room, the Cardinal's chamberlain entered from the courtyard to report that he had carried out the chaplain's instructions: The sedan chair and two mules were ready, waiting only for the woman who would comfort Lucia. The Cardinal told his chamberlain to instruct the local priest the moment he arrived with the woman, to speak with Don Abbondio, who was leading the expedition together with the Nameless One.

* This quote is from the Gospel of Luke, 15:24.

Before bidding farewell, he clasped the nobleman's hand one last time and repeated, "I'll be waiting for you." He turned to salute Don Abbondio and headed toward the church. The clergy followed behind, half in a cluster and half in an orderly procession. The two traveling companions were left alone in the room.

The Nameless One was absorbed in thought, impatient for the moment when he could free his Lucia from her pain and imprisonment. Now she was his, in a very different sense than the day before. His face expressed an intense agitation, which to Don Abbondio's suspicious eyes could have easily appeared to be something worse. He looked at the nobleman out of the corner of his eye and would have liked to start up a friendly conversation, but, "What should I say to him?" he thought. "Should I repeat, 'I couldn't be happier'? Happy about what? That, after a lifetime of doing the devil's work, you've finally decided to become an honest man like everyone else? Some compliment! . . . No matter how I put it, that's all my congratulations will end up meaning. And how do I know he really has suddenly turned into an honest man, out of the blue! Plenty of people put on an act in this world, and for plenty of reasons! How am I supposed to know what's true? Meanwhile, I have to accompany him! To that castle! What a mess! What a mess! If only someone had warned me this morning! If I do make it out of this alive, I'll give an earful to that Perpetua, who forced me to travel so far from my parish for no good reason, saying that all the priests, near and far, were coming here, and I shouldn't be left out. She went on and on, to get me to embark on this wretched business! Poor me! Well, I'd still better think of something to say to him."

After turning it over in his mind again and again, he figured he could try saying, "I hardly expected the good fortune of finding myself in such distinguished company." He was about to open his mouth when in came the chamberlain with the local priest, who informed them that the woman was waiting in the sedan chair, then turned to Don Abbondio to hear the Cardinal's additional instructions. Don Abbondio delivered them as best he could in his con-

fused state of mind, after which he approached the chamberlain, saying, "At least give me a tame animal because I'm not much of a horseman, to tell you the truth."

"You needn't worry," the man replied, suppressing a chuckle. "The mule belongs to the secretary, a man of letters."

"That will have to do," replied Don Abbondio, while thinking, "God help us."

Hearing that everything was ready, the Nameless One headed for the door quickly, but then he remembered Don Abbondio, who was lagging behind. He stopped to wait for him, and when the priest arrived in a flurry, almost apologetically, he bowed with a courteous and humble gesture, allowing him to go first. This helped to calm the poor priest's nerves. But what he saw the moment he stepped into the courtyard ruined that brief consolation. The Nameless One went to the corner where he had left his carbine, grabbed it by the barrel with one hand and by the strap with the other, and with a brisk, well-practiced motion, slung it over his shoulder.

"Oh, no! Oh, no!" thought Don Abbondio. "What does he mean to do with that contraption? What kind of sacrifice, of self-mortification, is this for a recent convert? What if something makes him lose his temper? Oh, what manner of mission is this?"

If the nobleman had any inkling of what was going through his companion's head, there's no knowing what he would have done to reassure him. But he was thousands of miles away from suspecting anything, and Don Abbondio was careful to avoid any gesture that might have clearly signified, "I don't trust you." When they got to the road, they found two mules saddled up. The Nameless One mounted the one presented to him by a groom.

"You're sure it's not skittish?" Don Abbondio asked the chamberlain, as he set back on the ground the foot he had just lifted up to the stirrup of his mule.

"Nothing to worry about; he's a lamb."

Don Abbondio tried to climb into the saddle, with the chamberlain's support. Up, up, up—and he was astride.

The sedan chair, borne by two more mules, was a few steps ahead of them. At the driver's command it started to move, and the party was off.

They had to pass in front of the crowded church, crossing a square that was packed with villagers and travelers who hadn't been able to get in. The great news had already spread, and at the sight of the party, at the sight of that man, the object of hatred and terror only hours before, and now the object of joyful amazement, a murmur of approval arose from the crowd, which opened up before them and pushed forward at the same time to get a better look. The sedan chair passed by. The Nameless One passed by. Before the open doors of the church, the nobleman doffed his hat and lowered his feared head all the way down to the mane of the mule, while a hundred voices whispered: "May God bless him!"

Don Abbondio also doffed his hat, bowed, and commended himself to heaven. But when he heard the solemn harmony of his confreres singing in chorus, he felt an envy, a rueful tenderness, and a heartache so deep he struggled to hold back his tears.

Once they were out of the village and into the open countryside, on winding and often deserted country roads, a darker veil settled over his thoughts. Looking about for something or someone to trust, his gaze could only land upon the driver who, as a member of the Cardinal's household, must be a good man, while also looking well-equipped to defend himself. Every so often, other travelers would appear, alone or in groups, hurrying to see the Cardinal. Those moments were a relief for Don Abbondio, though only fleeting, since he was headed for that dreaded valley, where the only people he would encounter were his friend's vassals: and what vassals they were! Now more than ever, he would have preferred to start a conversation with his friend, to get a better sense of him and stay on his good side. But seeing the nobleman so preoccupied, he lost any desire to engage him, and thus was left to his own devices. I will only give you a short sample of what the poor man said to himself on that trip, since to transcribe it all would require a book:

"Both saints and sinners have quicksilver in their veins: Truer

words were never said. But while they're in constant motion themselves, why do they have to drag the rest of us along? And who should the biggest busybody of all set his eyes upon and drag into this but me. Me! A man who minds his own business. Me! When all I want is to be left alone! Then there's that crazy troublemaker Don Rodrigo! He could be the happiest man in the world if he had a lick of sense. Rich, young, respected, courted: But no, the good life bores him, and he has to go digging up trouble for himself and everyone else. He could be living the high life: But no, he chooses the most insane, rotten, and infuriating profession in the world: harassing women! He could go to heaven in a coach and six: But no, he'd rather limp his way to hell. Not to mention that one . . ." And here he cast a sidelong glance at "that one," as if suspecting the man could read his mind. "That one, after setting the world on fire with his crimes, is now setting it on fire with his conversion . . . If he really did convert! Meanwhile I'm the one who gets stuck testing whether or not it's true! . . . Nothing you can do about it: When they're born with that fire in the belly, all they ever do is raise hell. What's so hard about living an honest life from childhood, like I have? No, sir: You'd rather maim, murder, maraud. Poor me! And then all that hubbub about repentance. Repentance! If you put your mind to it, you can repent in the peace and quiet of your own home, without fanfare, without bothering your neighbor. And then His Grace, standing there with open arms at the drop of a hat: 'My dear friend, my dear friend.' To hear him carrying on, you'd think he'd witnessed a miracle. And then jumping headfirst into a decision, quickly quickly. Well, haste makes waste is what they say where I come from. And then, to hand him over to a poor parish priest, with no precautions! Like flipping a coin to decide a man's life. A holy archbishop like him should be more protective of his priests, treat them like the apple of his eye. It wouldn't hurt his saintliness to practice a little self-control, a little prudence, a little charity, if you ask me . . . And what if the whole thing is an act? Who knows what transpires in the hearts of men? Especially men like him! And I'm the one that gets stuck accompanying him to his home! Who knows

what mischief is behind this: Poor me! Better not think about it! And how did Lucia get mixed up in this mess? Maybe there's some kind of arrangement with Don Rodrigo. What terrible people! But at least it would explain things. But how did that one get hold of her? Who knows? Everything's so hush-hush with His Grace. And me, the one they send trotting off—nobody tells me anything. I don't want to know other people's business—but if I'm risking my skin, I've got every right to know. If all we're doing is fetching that poor creature, so be it! Although he could have brought her with him the first time. And then, if he has converted, if he has become a holy father, what do they need me for? What a mess! Enough: I pray to God it's true. It will have been a great bother, but all right. I'll be happy for poor Lucia's sake: It must have been a narrow escape. God only knows what she went through. I feel sorry for her, but she'll be the end of me . . . If I could only look into his heart and see what he's thinking. One minute he's looking like Saint Anthony of the Desert; the next he's Holofernes in the flesh.* Poor me! Poor me! Never mind. Heaven help me, since I didn't come here just for the fun of it."

From the Nameless One's face, one could, in fact, almost see the thoughts running through his head, the way the clouds pass over the sun in a storm, constantly alternating between an angry light and a cold darkness. His spirit—still intoxicated by Federigo's soothing words—felt remade and rejuvenated in this new life and ascended to thoughts of mercy, forgiveness, and love; then it fell back under the burden of his sinful past. He reflected anxiously on which of his evil deeds he could repair, and which he could stop short of completing, and which remedies were the quickest and surest, and how to disentangle many knots, and what to do about so many accomplices: The mere thought of it all was staggering. Even

* Saint Anthony of the Desert and Judith beheading Holofernes were both popular subjects for artists. Anthony (also known as Saint Anthony Abbot) was often depicted being tormented by devils in the desert. The most famous version of the Judith story is by Artemisia Gentileschi, painted in the early seventeenth century.

on the current expedition, which was the easiest and closest to completion, he proceeded with an impatient distress, worried about how much the poor girl was still suffering, and knowing that he, despite his eagerness to free her, was the cause of it.

When they came to a fork in the road, the driver turned around to ask directions: The Nameless One pointed the way with his hand, while at the same time gesturing him to hurry up.

They entered the valley. Imagine how poor Don Abbondio felt in that moment! To be inside that notorious valley, about which he'd heard such horrible stories. To see the flower of Italian bravi in the flesh and blood: notorious men, fearless and ruthless. To run into one, two, or three at every turn of the road. They bowed submissively to the Nameless One, but what sunburnt faces! What thick mustaches! What nasty stares, which to Don Abbondio seemed to say, "Let's rough up this priest." So great was his terror that, at its peak, he said to himself, "I wish I had married them! What could be worse than this!" All the while, they advanced along a rocky path beside the river. On the opposite side were harsh, dark, barren cliffs; on the near side, inhabitants that would make any wasteland preferable. He felt like Dante in the lower circles of hell!

They passed the Malanotte. Bravi at the door, bows to the lord, curious glances at his fellow traveler and the driver. The men had no idea what to think. The Nameless One's solitary departure that morning had already been extraordinary and his return now was no less so. Was he leading his prey into a trap? And how had he managed to snare them single-handedly? And why the foreign sedan chair? And whose livery was that? They stared and stared, but not one of them moved, held back by their master's forbidding glare.

They climb the slope. They're at the top. The bravi guarding the terrace and the gates step back and to the side to let them through. The Nameless One signals to them to stand still. He spurs his mule and passes in front of the sedan chair, signaling to the driver and to Don Abbondio to follow. He enters a first courtyard, then a second. He goes toward a small doorway, gestures "stay back" to a bravo who has run up to hold the stirrup, and tells him, "Stay here, and

don't let anyone in." He dismounts, quickly ties the mule to a railing, goes up to the woman in the sedan chair, who has drawn back the curtain, and whispers, "Try to comfort her immediately. Let her know immediately that she is free and among friends. God will thank you for it!" Then he gestures to the driver to open the sedan chair's door. He turns to Don Abbondio and, with a more serene expression than the priest has ever seen or thought to see, flush with the joy of the good deed he is finally about to perform, whispers to him, "Father, I will not ask your forgiveness for the inconvenience to which I have subjected you. You are doing this for One who will repay you handsomely, and for this poor child of His." At this, he holds the bridle with one hand and the stirrup with the other, to help Don Abbondio dismount.

That face, those words, that gesture, restored the priest to life. He let out a sigh of relief that had been building inside him for the last hour without finding a way out. He bowed toward the Nameless One and replied in a low, low voice, "Do you think so? But, but, but . . . !" and slid off his mount as best he could. The Nameless One tethered his mule and told the driver to wait. He took a key from his pocket, unlocked the door, and entered. He ushered in the priest and the woman, leading the way to a staircase, which all three ascended in silence.

Chapter 24

Lucia had opened her eyes a short while before, but struggled to fully enter the waking world, to separate the murky visions of sleep from memories and images of a reality that felt like a dire vision of hell. The old woman had come over to her immediately to say, in a voice dripping with false humility, "Ah, so, you slept? You could've slept in the bed, like I told you many times last night." Getting no reply, she continued to plead in a tone that barely concealed her annoyance. "Now, come and eat; show some sense. You look awful! You need to eat something. Otherwise he's going to blame me when he gets back!"

"No, no, I want to leave. I want to go to my mother. Your master promised me. He said, 'tomorrow.' Where is he now?"

"He's gone out. He told me he'll be back soon, and that he'll do everything you want."

"He did? He did? Good. I want to go to my mother. I want to go now!"

At that very moment, they heard footsteps in the next room, followed by a knock on the door. The old woman ran to it and asked, "Who's there?"

"Open up!" replied a familiar, if more subdued, voice. The old woman slid the bolt across the door. The Nameless One pressed lightly upon it to open it just enough for the old woman to leave and Don Abbondio to squeeze in, together with the good matron. He then closed the door behind them, and ordered the old woman to a distant corner of the castle, where he had already directed the maid standing guard outside.

That movement, the waiting, and the appearance of new people all made Lucia even more agitated. Although the present was unbearable, any change became a new source of fear and suspicion. She looked up and saw a priest and a woman, which made her feel a little better. She looked more closely—is it him or isn't it? She recognized Don Abbondio and stared at him as if in a trance. The woman walked across the room and leaned over Lucia with a look of pity. Taking her hands, a gesture intended to both comfort her and pull her to her feet, she said, "You poor girl. Come, come with us."

"Who are you?" Lucia asked, and without awaiting a reply, she turned back to Don Abbondio, who was standing a few steps back, he, too, wearing a look of compassion. She stared at him and exclaimed, "You! Is it you, Reverend Father? Where are we? . . . Oh, poor me! I don't know what's happening to me!"

"No, no!" replied Don Abbondio. "It really is me. Cheer up. Can't you see? We've come to take you away from here. I really am your pastor, and I've come here for you, on muleback . . ."

As if all her strength had returned in an instant, Lucia jumped to her feet. Then she stared at those two faces again and said, "Our Blessed Virgin must have sent you."

"I believe so," said the good woman.

"But can we leave here now, can we really leave?" Lucia asked, lowering her voice, with a fearful and suspicious look in her eyes. "All those people . . . ?" she continued, her lips drawn, shivering with shock and horror. "And that nobleman! That man! . . . But it's true, he had promised me . . ."

"He's here, too. In person. And he's come with us for this very purpose," said Don Abbondio. "He's waiting outside the door. Let's go quickly and not keep a man like him waiting."

Just then, the man of whom they were speaking opened the door and showed himself in. Mere minutes before, Lucia, having lost all hope, had wanted to see him and only him. But now, after seeing friendly faces and hearing friendly voices, she could not repress a sudden revulsion. She shuddered, held her breath, hugged the good

woman, and buried her face in her bosom. When the Nameless One saw the girl whom he could barely look at the night before, the girl whom abstinence and prolonged suffering had made even more distraught, exhausted, and distressed, he stood back from the threshold. At the sight of her terrified gesture, he lowered his eyes and remained silent and motionless for a moment longer. Then, without moving from where he stood, he answered her unspoken question. "It's true," he exclaimed, "forgive me!"

"He's come to free you. He's no longer the man he used to be. Now he's good: Don't you hear him asking you for forgiveness?" the good woman whispered in Lucia's ear.

"What more do you want him to say? Come now, head up, stop acting like a baby so we can leave quickly," added Don Abbondio. Lucia raised her face, stared at the Nameless One, and, seeing his head bent, his gaze mortified and confused, she was gripped by a mix of relief, gratitude, and pity, and exclaimed, "Oh, sir! May God bless you for the mercy you have shown me!"

"And to you, one hundred times over, for the good you are doing me through your words."

At this, he turned, walked to the door, and was the first to leave. Lucia, now fully revived, followed him out with the woman holding her by the arm and Don Abbondio close behind. They descended the stairs and reached the door leading to the courtyard. The Nameless One held it open, then went to the sedan chair and opened its door; with an almost timid kindness (two qualities quite new to him), he held Lucia by her arm, and helped her and then the good woman to climb in. Finally, he untied Don Abbondio's mule and helped him to remount.

"Oh, what an honor!" the priest said, and was astride the animal much more quickly than the first time. Once the Nameless One was also in his saddle, the small party set out. The nobleman's head was held high, and his gaze had regained its usual imperious expression. The bravi he encountered could clearly see signs of deep thought and unusual concern in his face, but they did not understand much more than that—nor was it possible for them to so much as guess.

For at the castle, they still knew nothing of the great change he had undergone.

The good woman immediately drew the curtains of the sedan chair. She took Lucia's hands affectionately and started to comfort her with words of sympathy, tenderness, and congratulations. Seeing how the poor girl had been unable to fully savor the joy of her liberation, due to the confusion and obscurity surrounding it—not to mention her exhaustion after the torments she had suffered—the woman gave the name of the village where they were going, which she thought would calm and settle the poor girl's thoughts.

"We are?" said Lucia, who knew how close it was to her home. "Oh Blessed Virgin Mary, I give you thanks! What about my mother? My mother?"

"We'll send for her immediately," said the good woman, not realizing it had already been done.

"Yes, yes, may God bless you! . . . And you, who are you? How did you get here?"

"I was sent by my own pastor," answered the good woman, "because this nobleman . . . God touched his heart (bless the Lord!), and he came to our village to speak with the Cardinal-Archbishop (that saintly man, who is here visiting!). He repented for his sins and said that he wanted to change his ways. He told the Cardinal that he had arranged for the kidnapping of a poor innocent girl—that would be you—in league with another godless man, whose name the priest didn't disclose."

Lucia raised her eyes to heaven.

"Maybe you know who he is," the good woman continued, "but let's not think about that just now. The Cardinal felt that, since you are a girl, a female chaperone was needed, and he told the pastor to find someone. And the pastor, out of the goodness of his heart, came to me . . ."

"Oh! May God reward you for your charity!"

"Whatever do you mean, my poor girl? The Reverend Father told me to cheer you up, try to lift your spirits, and make you understand that God saved you through a miracle . . ."

"Oh, yes! It really was a miracle. Thanks to the intercession of the Blessed Virgin."

"And he told me that you should rejoice, and forgive the man that harmed you, and be thankful that God worked His mercy on him. Indeed, you should pray for him, too, for that will not only be a credit to you, it will also fill your heart."

Lucia answered with a gaze sweeter than words could express, a gaze that said yes, as clearly as if she had voiced it.

"Good girl!" continued the woman. "And since your own pastor was also there (priests had come from all over, enough of them to celebrate four high Masses at the same time), the Cardinal decided to send him along, too. But he hasn't been much help. I'd heard he wasn't much of a man, and now I can see with my own two eyes that he's as tangled as a cat in a ball of yarn."

"And that one . . ." asked Lucia, "that one who has become good . . . who is he?"

"What? You don't know?" said the good woman, and she spoke his name.

"Lord have mercy!" exclaimed Lucia. That name: She'd heard it repeated so many times with horror, and in more than a few of these stories he was always the ogre! At the thought of being in his terrifying power before and now being under his merciful protection, at the thought of such a horrible plight and such a sudden redemption, to realize that the gruff, then emotional, then humbled face she had seen belonged to him—she was astonished, saying only, "Lord have mercy!" every now and then.

"It truly is a great mercy!" said the good woman. "It must be a great relief for half the world. To think of how many people he tormented. And now, just like the Reverend Father told me . . . you can tell by the look on his face that he's become a saint! Not to mention the things he immediately set out to do."

It would be untrue to say that the good woman was not extremely curious to know every detail of the great adventure in which she was playing a part. But to her credit, I should say that, in addition to her respectful sympathy for Lucia, and her sense of the gravity and

dignity of her assigned task, it never crossed her mind to ask an idle or indiscreet question; her every word on that trip was of comfort and concern for the poor girl.

"God only knows the last time you ate!"

"I don't remember . . . it's been a while."

"Poor thing! You need to get your strength back."

"Yes," replied Lucia in a faint voice.

"We'll find something ready at my house, thank goodness. Come now, we're almost there."

Lucia let herself collapse against the backrest of the sedan chair, as if to take a nap, and the good woman let her rest.

For Don Abbondio, the return trip was not nearly as distressing as the way there had been, but it wasn't exactly pleasant, either. His panic was replaced by relief, but a hundred other irritations soon began to crop up in his heart, not unlike the ground where a large tree has been uprooted: It remains bare for a period, but then fills up with weeds. He found himself growing more sensitive to everything else, and unfortunately, his thoughts of both the present and the future offered no lack of material with which to torment himself. He felt the discomfort of traveling in this unaccustomed style more than before, especially during the initial descent from the castle into the valley. The sedan driver, urged on by gestures from the Nameless One, had made the animals move at a fast clip, and the two mules followed behind at the same pace. Wherever the incline became steeper, poor Don Abbondio was thrust forward, as if he were being hoisted from behind; he had to hold on to the pommel for dear life just to stay in the saddle. He didn't dare ask to go slower, however, since he, too, wanted to get away from that area as quickly as possible. Whenever they came to an elevation in the road, or an embankment, the mule, true to its nature, would hew to the side, as if out of spite, and place its hooves right along the edge, so when Don Abbondio looked down, he saw a steep drop, or what looked to him like a precipice. "Ah, so you've got the same bad habits as your master," he had a mind to tell the animal, "always looking for trouble rather than taking the easy way!" He yanked the bridle

in the opposite direction, but to no avail. And so, grumbling with aggravation and fear, he let himself be led, as usual, by the pleasure of others. Now that he had a better sense of their master's intentions, he was no longer so intimidated by the bravi. "But," he reflected, "if the news of his big conversion gets out while we're still in the area, who knows how they might react! Anything could happen! What if they think I came here to play the missionary! Poor me! They'll turn me into a martyr!" The scowl on the Nameless One's face didn't bother him. "That's exactly what we need to keep these characters at a distance," he thought. "Even I can see that. But what did I do to deserve such company!"

They reached the bottom of the hill, and at last they left the valley behind. The tension slowly drained from the Nameless One's face, and Don Abbondio also came to wear a more natural expression. He pulled his head out from between his shoulders, stretched his arms and legs, and started to sit up straighter in the saddle, looking like a new man. With an easier spirit, he took deeper breaths and started to contemplate other, more distant dangers.

"What will that brute Don Rodrigo have to say? With his nose out of joint, the damage to his reputation, and everyone jeering at him, I can imagine how badly he's going to react to this news. I've no doubt he'll get even worse. Just you wait, he's going to take it out on me, since I got stuck in the middle of this pageant. And if he had the courage to send those two devils to accost me on the road before, who knows what he's got in store for me now! He can't take it out on your illustrious self, who's a much bigger fish than he'll ever be. No, he'll have to hold his tongue. But the venom will be in his veins, and he'll have to unleash it on someone! I know how these scores get settled. And it's always the weak that have to pay the piper. His Grace is right to get Lucia out of harm's way. And that other poor hapless soul is safe and sound and has already been punished enough. Which leaves me. Wouldn't it be cruel, after all the trials and tribulations I've gone through—without getting any credit for them—if I had to pay the piper? What would His Grace do to defend me then, after dragging me into this? Can he guaran-

tee that the hellion isn't saving his worst for me? But he's got so much on his mind, a finger in every pot! How can he keep an eye on everything? Sometimes those do-gooders leave things even more tangled up than before. They only see the big picture; once they feel a little satisfaction, they move on, and don't want the trouble of dealing with the consequences. But the evildoers are much more diligent. They're relentless; they follow everything to the bitter end, like they have a canker gnawing at them.

"Will I have to argue that I did not come here of my own free will but at the express command of his Illustrious Grace? Then it will look as if I was taking the side of evil. Heaven help me! Me, on the side of evil? For the sheer fun of it? Enough! I think it'd be best to tell Perpetua the whole story and let her spread it around. As long as it doesn't strike His Grace's fancy to publicize the event and make a useless scene by tossing my name in the mix!

"For good measure, as soon as we arrive, if he's already left the church, I'll go find him to pay my respects very quickly. Or else I could convey my excuses and go straight home. Lucia is in good hands and doesn't need me anymore. And after all this trouble, I've got a right to some rest, too. And then . . . I pray His Grace doesn't suddenly get a hankering to hear the entire story and expect me to account for the business of that marriage! That's the last thing we need! What if he pays a visit to my parish? . . . Oh! We'll deal with that when the time comes. I don't want to get myself all worked up before I have to. I'm in enough trouble as it is. For now, I'm going to shut myself up in my house. As long as His Grace is in these parts, Don Rodrigo won't dare do anything crazy. But after that? . . . After that? Ah! I can see that my final years are not going to be easy!"

In fact, the church services were not yet over when the party arrived. They passed back through the crowd, which was no less excited than before, and then they split up. The two men on mules turned in to a small piazza to the side, at the far end of which the pastor's house was located. The sedan chair continued on to the home of the good woman.

Don Abbondio followed through with his plan. As soon as he

dismounted, he complimented the Nameless One lavishly and asked him to convey his apologies to the Cardinal, since he had to return to his parish on urgent business. He went looking for his "horse," as he called it—the walking stick he had left in a corner of the room—and set off on foot. The Nameless One, for his part, waited for the Cardinal to return from church.

The good woman, having seated Lucia in the best spot in her kitchen, was busy preparing something to restore her strength, shrugging off, with a certain rustic cordiality, the thanks and apologies that Lucia kept offering.

Quickly quickly, she rekindled the fire beneath a kettle in which a nice capon was floating. She brought the stock to a boil and then poured some into a bowl filled with hunks of bread, which she at last presented to Lucia. As she watched the poor girl revive with each spoonful, she congratulated herself aloud that the event had taken place on a day when, in her words, there was something on the hearth besides the cat. "Today, everyone's doing their best to scrounge up some food," she said, and added, "except those who are so poor that they struggle even to put together a loaf of vetch bread and a bowl of millet polenta. But today everyone's hoping to receive something from such a charitable nobleman. Thank heavens we're not in that condition; between my husband's trade and a little plot of land we have, we manage to get by. So go ahead and eat to your heart's content, for soon the capon will be ready and you can have something a little more substantial." With that, the good woman went back to getting the meal ready and setting the table.

Lucia, her forces partially restored and her spirits settling, began fixing herself up out of a force of habit and a penchant for neatness and modesty: She combed and pinned back her loose, tangled hair and rearranged the kerchief over her breast and around her neck. As she did, her fingers brushed against the rosary she had placed around her neck the night before. She looked down at it, and in an instant, she was robbed of her composure. The memory of her vow, repressed and stifled by the many other sensations surrounding her, was suddenly resuscitated, appearing before her clearly and dis-

tinctly. All her newly revived mental faculties were once again overwhelmed. Were it not that a life of innocence, resignation, and faith had fortified her spirits, the remorse she felt in that moment would have given way to despair. After the rush of thoughts preceding language, the first words to form in her mind were, "Woe is me, what have I done!"

But that thought, too, renewed her feeling of shock. She recalled all the circumstances of the vow—the unbearable distress, the little hope she had of being rescued, the fervor of her prayers, and the depth of feeling with which she had made that promise. To regret that promise, after benefiting from its grace, seemed sacrilegious and ungrateful, a betrayal of both God and the Virgin Mary. Such an act of treachery would invite new and more terrifying misfortunes from which not even prayer could protect her. And so she hastened to take back that momentary regret. With a devout gesture, she removed the rosary from around her neck, and holding it in her trembling hand, confirmed and renewed her vow while asking, in a heartfelt entreaty, to be granted the strength to keep her promise, and be free of the thoughts and occasions that might overly agitate or shake her resolve.

Her separation from Renzo (who had no likelihood of returning)—a separation that until this moment had been so bitter—now appeared to be an act of Providence, which had made the two circumstances coincide to serve a single purpose. So she tried to find in the first some reason to accept the second. This led her to imagine that Providence, to complete its work, would also find a way for Renzo to resign himself and stop thinking about her . . . But the moment this idea occurred to her, it threw into disarray the very mind that had sought it out. Poor Lucia, feeling that her heart was on the verge of regret, returned to her prayers, to the confirmations and the struggle, after which she stood up—if I may be allowed this expression—like a tired, wounded victor over a vanquished (but not killed) enemy.

Suddenly, there was a scampering of feet and a riot of happy voices. It was the good woman's little family coming back from

church. Two girls and a boy came bounding in. They stopped for a moment to take a curious look at Lucia, then ran to their mother and huddled around her. One of them asked the how and why of the strange guest and her name. Another wanted to talk about the amazing things she had seen. The good matron answered each and every child with "hush, hush." Then in came the master of the house, at a more serene pace, but with a face colored with polite concern. He was, if I have neglected to mention it, the tailor for the village and the surrounding areas, a man who knew how to read and had, in fact, read—and more than once—*The Golden Legend, The Matter of France,* and *Wretched Guerrin* and was reputed to be, in those parts, a man of talent and science.* He rebuffed such praise modestly, saying only that he had picked the wrong vocation, and if he, rather than many others, had pursued his studies . . . ! Still, he was a peach of a man. Having been present when the parish priest had asked his wife to go on the mission of mercy, he had not only given her his approval but also—as if it were necessary—his encouragement. Now that the Mass, the pomp, the crowds, and, especially, the Cardinal's sermon had made him feel even more exuberant, he returned home with the anxious desire to know how the expedition had gone, and the expectation of finding the poor innocent victim safe and sound.

"Look who's here," the good woman said to him as he entered, nodding toward Lucia. The girl blushed and stood up, starting to mumble her apologies. Crossing the room to her, the tailor interrupted Lucia with a warm greeting, exclaiming, "Welcome! Welcome! You bring the blessings of heaven into this house. I'm so happy to have you here! I already knew you would arrive safely, because I have never found anything in my books about God beginning a miracle without completing it. I'm so happy to see you

* *The Golden Legend* (*Legenda aurea* in Latin) was an extremely popular compilation of saints' lives by Jacobus de Voragine (c. 1230–98) that circulated throughout Europe in the early modern period, while the other two titles, by Andrea da Barberino (1370–1431), were chivalric romances based on the French *chanson de geste.*

here. Poor girl! But it is such a wonderful thing to have benefited from a miracle!"

Now don't go thinking he was the only one describing what had happened as a miracle because he had read *The Golden Legend.* The whole town and district would go on to describe it in the same terms for as long as it was remembered. And, to be honest, there really was no better word for the yarns embroidered onto the story in the years to come.

Going over to his wife, who was lifting the kettle off the chain, he whispered, "Did everything go well?"

"Couldn't have gone better. I'll tell you about it later."

"Yes, yes. As soon as you're ready."

After resting the kettle, she went to Lucia and accompanied her to the table, where she sat her down. Breaking off a wing of the capon, she placed it before her. She and her husband also sat down, and they both encouraged their shy and despondent guest to eat. From his first bites, the tailor started to hold forth in emphatic tones, amid the frequent interruptions of the children, who were also eating around the table and had, in truth, seen too many extraordinary things to be a captive audience for very long. He described the solemn ceremony, then skipped ahead to talk about the miraculous conversion. But the thing that had made the biggest impression on him was the Cardinal's sermon, to which he kept referring.

"To see him, a true aristocrat, before the altar, as if he were a simple parish priest . . ." he said.

"And with that gold thing he wore on his head," said one of the little girls.

"Shush! To think, I was saying, how a nobleman like that, and such a wise man, who, from what I hear, has read every book in creation, which no one else has ever done before, not even in Milan. To think that he can simplify things in a way that everyone can understand . . ."

"I understood, too," said another little chatterbox.

"Oh, you did? What did you understand, now? Shush!"

"I understood that he explained the Gospel rather than our pastor."

"Shush! I'm not talking about people who know things: They're supposed to understand! I'm saying that even the thickest—the most ignorant—could follow his sermon. If you asked them to repeat exactly what he said, they wouldn't be able to fish out a word. But they have the feeling inside. And though he never mentioned that certain nobleman by name, he was obviously talking about him! All you had to do to understand was see the tears in his eyes. And then everyone started crying . . ."

"They really did," the boy burst out. "But why were they all crying that way, like babies?"

"Shush! There sure are some hard hearts in this town. But he really showed us that, even if there is a famine, we still have to thank God and be happy. Do what we can, work hard, help one another, and then be happy. Because it's no disgrace to suffer or be poor. It's a disgrace to do evil. And this is not just idle talk. Because we know that he himself lives like a poor man, and he'd take the bread from his own plate to feed the hungry. When he, more than anyone you can think of, could be living in the lap of luxury. Ah, and it is such a pleasure to hear him speak, not like so many others with their 'Do what I say, not what I do.' And then he made us see that, even those who aren't aristocrats, if they have more than they require, then they should share with those in need."

Here, he interrupted himself, as if struck by a thought. He sat still for a moment, then he put together a plate of the food that was on the table and, after adding a piece of bread, placed it on a napkin; taking it by its four corners, he said to the oldest girl, "Here, take this." In her other hand, he placed a flask of wine, and added, "Go to the widow Maria's. Leave her this bundle and tell her it's so she can enjoy some happiness with her children. But politely, mind you, so it doesn't look like charity. And don't say a word if you run into anyone. And watch that you don't drop it."

Tears came to Lucia's eyes, and in her heart she felt a soothing tenderness, like the relief she had received from the spontaneous

remarks earlier that a more deliberate speech would never have imparted. Her spirit was lifted by his descriptions of the visions of splendor and the surges of piety and wonder. She was captivated by the enthusiasm of the storyteller himself and forgot her own sad thoughts. Even when she returned to them, she felt stronger and better able to resist them. The thought of her great sacrifice had not lost its bitter taste, but now it was associated with a vague feeling of solemn and austere joy.

Soon after, the village priest came by to say that the Cardinal had sent him to inquire after Lucia and inform her that His Grace wished to see her that very day, and to convey his thanks to the tailor and his wife. The two of them, excited and confused, could not find the words to reciprocate such pronouncements from such a personage.

"Has your mother arrived yet?" the priest asked Lucia.

"My mother!" she exclaimed. When she heard that Agnese had been sent for, by order of the Archbishop, Lucia placed her apron over her eyes and burst into tears. She continued crying long after the priest had left.

When the tumultuous feelings stirred in her by that announcement started to yield to more sedate thoughts, the poor girl remembered that the happiness of seeing again her mother, who was now so near—a happiness that had seemed impossible only a few hours earlier—is what she had expressly prayed for during those terrible hours, and made almost the condition of her vow. "*Return me safely to my mother,*" she had said; and now she remembered these words clearly. Her resolve to keep her promise was now even firmer, and she regretted once again, more bitterly this time, that "*poor me!*" which had initially escaped her lips.

Agnese was, in fact, already nearby, even as they spoke of her. It is easy to imagine how the poor woman had felt upon receiving that unexpected invitation and learning the news—necessarily incomplete and confusing—of the danger her daughter had faced, now past but still horrifying. The messenger could neither describe in detail nor explain the whole terrible business. All Agnese could do

was attempt to explain it to herself. After running her hands through her hair, after shouting repeatedly, "Oh Lord! Oh Blessed Virgin!" after peppering the messenger with questions that he could not answer, she climbed into the cart in a fury, and continued to exclaim and ask questions without getting any answers for the entire ride. At one point, however, she ran into Don Abbondio, who was moving slowly slowly, setting his walking stick ahead of himself with each step. After an "oh!" from both parties, he stopped, she ordered the cart to stop, and she got out. They stepped into a chestnut grove alongside the road. Don Abbondio reported what he had been able to learn and was forced to witness. His story was unclear, but Agnese was at least reassured that Lucia was safe and sound. She breathed a sigh of relief.

Don Abbondio wanted to bring up another subject and give her elaborate instructions on how to behave with the Archbishop, if, as was likely, he wished to speak with her and her daughter. The main thing was to avoid any mention of the marriage. But Agnese, well aware that the good man was only pursuing his own interests, left him standing there without making any promises, and indeed without deciding anything, for she had more important matters on her mind. And she continued on her way.

Finally, the cart reached its destination and stopped in front of the tailor's house. Lucia jumped up from her chair. Agnese stepped down from the cart and raced inside. In a second, they were in each other's arms. The tailor's wife, the only other person there, comforted the two women, calmed them down, rejoiced with them, and then, discreet as ever, left them alone, saying she would prepare their bed, something she could easily manage by herself. Besides, both she and her husband would rather sleep on the floor than make their guests seek shelter elsewhere.

After the first outpouring of hugs and tears, Agnese wanted to know everything that had happened to Lucia, who proceeded to tell her the painful story. As the reader knows all too well, it was a story that no one person knew in its entirety. Even for Lucia, there were obscure and altogether inexplicable parts. Chief among them,

the fatal coincidence of that ominous carriage on the road at the very moment that she was passing by on a special errand. Mother and daughter ventured a hundred guesses without ever hitting the mark, or even getting close.

As for the chief author of the plot, neither one of them could think of anyone except Don Rodrigo.

"That black soul! That outcast from hell!" exclaimed Agnese. "But his hour will soon be up. The Good Lord will make him pay for what he's done, and then he'll know what it's like to . . ."

"No, Mother, no!" interrupted Lucia. "Don't wish suffering on him, don't wish it on anyone! If you knew what it means to suffer! If you had felt it! No, no! Let us instead pray to God and to the Blessed Virgin for him, so that God may touch his heart, as he did the heart of that other poor nobleman, who used to be even worse and is now a saint."

More than once the revulsion Lucia felt in reviving such fresh and cruel memories made her hesitate. More than once, shedding tears, she struggled to find the strength and words to continue. But a different feeling restrained her at one point in her tale: the vow. She was afraid that her mother would accuse her of being rash and impulsive, and that, as in the attempted marriage, she would trot out one of her lax rules of conscience and demand that Lucia go along with it. Or that the poor woman would confide in someone, if only to solicit other ideas and advice, and in so doing make Lucia's vow public; at the mere thought of this Lucia could feel her face turning red. She also sensed some embarrassment on her mother's part, an inexplicable reluctance to bring up the subject. All of these things together made Lucia hide that important detail, and she resolved to confide first in Fra Cristoforo. So imagine how she felt when, asking after him, she learned that he was gone, sent to a place far, far away, a town with a strange-sounding name!

"Shall we talk about Renzo?" asked Agnese.

"He's safe, isn't he?" replied Lucia anxiously.

"That much is certain, since everyone says so. They're all sure that he's taken refuge near Bergamo, but exactly where, no one

knows. And so far, he hasn't sent word. Maybe he hasn't found a way yet."

"Ah, if he's safe, thank God!" said Lucia. She was trying to change the subject when they were interrupted by a surprise: the appearance of the Cardinal-Archbishop.

On his return from church, where we had left him, he heard from the Nameless One that Lucia had arrived, safe and sound. He had then invited the nobleman to join him at the table, and seated him to his right, in a circle of priests who couldn't stop staring at him—his demeanor so tame yet strong, so humble yet domineering—and comparing him to the image long held in their minds.

Once they had finished eating, the two men withdrew together. After a conversation that went on much longer than their earlier talk, the Nameless One departed for his castle on the same mule he had ridden that morning. And the Cardinal, summoning the local priest, told him that he wanted to be taken to the house where Lucia was staying.

"Oh, Your Grace," the priest replied. "No need to trouble yourself. I'll immediately send word to the girl to come here with her mother, if she's arrived, as well as her hosts, if Your Grace so wishes. Everyone whom Your Illustrious Grace wishes to see."

"What I wish is to go and visit them myself," Federigo replied.

"No need for Your Illustrious Grace to trouble himself. I'll send for them immediately, it will only take a moment," insisted the meddling priest (an otherwise good man), not realizing that the purpose of the visit was for the Cardinal to pay homage, at the same time, to misfortune, innocence, hospitality, and his own ministry. But after his superior had repeated his wish once more, the subordinate bowed and led the way.

When the two men appeared on the road, all the people gathered there stepped forward to meet them, and soon more people came running from every direction, getting as close as they could, right next to or right behind them, rough and tumble. The priest kept saying, "Get back! Make room! Enough now!" "Let them be," Federigo told him, and went forward, one moment raising his hand

in blessing, and lowering it the next to pat the heads of the children underfoot. In this way, they reached the house and entered, while the crowd swelled outside. In their midst was the tailor, who had followed the crowd like the others, with his eyes peeled and his mouth agape, not knowing where everyone was headed. When he saw that unexpected destination, he made his way—you can imagine how boisterously—shouting repeatedly, "Make way for a man who's got to get through," and in he went.

Agnese and Lucia heard a rumble from the street getting louder. As they wondered what it could possibly be, the door opened and in walked the Cardinal and the local priest.

"Is she the one?" the first asked the second, and at an affirmative nod, he went to Lucia, who was standing stock-still next to her mother. Both women were struck with surprise and embarrassment, unable to speak or move. But Federigo's soft voice, his appearance, demeanor, and especially his words immediately set them at ease. "Poor girl," he began. "God has put you to a great test, but He has also shown that He has never stopped watching over you, and never forgotten you. He returned you to safety. And He has made you His instrument to perform a great deed, to foster a great act of mercy for one, while at the same time edifying the many."

The mistress of the house appeared. At the sounds from the street, she, too, had looked out the window, and, seeing who was coming toward her house, had fixed herself up as best she could before running down the stairs. The tailor entered through the back door at almost the same time. Seeing the conversation well underway, the husband and wife withdrew to the corner at a respectful distance. After greeting them courteously, the Cardinal continued to speak with the mother and daughter, inserting an occasional question into his words of comfort, to see if their answers might give him an opportunity to perform an act of kindness for one who had suffered so much.

"All priests should be like Your Grace, and take the side of the poor rather than getting them in trouble, and then leaving them to

fend for themselves," said Agnese, excited by the familiar and loving demeanor of Federigo, and vexed at the thought of Don Abbondio, who always sacrificed others, then tried to keep them from venting their feelings or taking their complaints to someone higher up, when, through a rare circumstance, the opportunity arose.

"Please, speak your mind," said the Cardinal. "Speak freely."

"I mean to say that if our pastor had done his duty, none of this would ever have happened."

At the Cardinal's insistence that she explain herself, Agnese began to stumble over her words in the telling of a story in which she herself had played a part she would rather not disclose, especially to such a personage. Still, she managed to find a way, through a tiny omission. She talked about the planned marriage, the refusal of Don Abbondio—without leaving out the "my superiors won't have it" excuse he had used (ah, Agnese!)—and then she skipped ahead to Don Rodrigo's attempted kidnapping, and how, having been forewarned, they had managed to escape. "But then," she added and concluded, "we escaped only to run into new troubles. If our pastor had told us the truth instead, and married my poor children, we would have left town immediately, all three of us, in secret, and gone far away, to a place that not even the winds would know. As it is, we wasted time, and what happened, happened."

"Your priest will have to account to me for his behavior," said the Cardinal.

"No, Your Grace, please," Agnese hastened to say. "That's not the reason why I told you all this. Please don't reprimand him. What's done is done. Besides, what good would it do? If it happened again, he'd do the same thing."

But Lucia, unhappy with her mother's version of the story, added, "We were also partly to blame. It was clearly not God's will that we should be married."

"Poor child, how could you possibly be to blame?" asked Federigo.

Lucia, despite the warning looks her mother was secretly casting her way, told the story of their attempted marriage at Don Abbon-

dio's house, and she concluded by saying, "We were wrong, and God has punished us."

"Accept from His hand the pains you have suffered, and go in peace," said Federigo, "for no one has more reason to rejoice and to hope than those who have suffered and take the blame upon themselves."

He then asked for the whereabouts of her fiancé, and on hearing from Agnese (Lucia remained silent, lowering her head and eyes) that he had fled the village, he was visibly surprised and saddened, and wanted to know why.

Agnese told him what little she knew of Renzo's story.

"I have heard talk of him," said the Cardinal. "But how could a boy who's implicated in that sort of thing be engaged to a girl like her?"

"He was a good boy," said Lucia, with a blushing face but a steady voice.

"He was a quiet boy, almost too quiet," added Agnese. "Ask anyone, including our priest. Who knows what kind of mischief, what kind of intrigues, they cooked up down there in Milan? It doesn't take much to pass a poor man off as a criminal."

"Unfortunately, you're right," said the Cardinal. "I'll see what I can find out about him, I promise," and he took down the boy's first and last name in his notebook. He went on to say that he planned to visit her village in a few days, by which point Lucia should have no reason to fear returning there. In the meantime, he would make sure she had a safe place to stay until everything had been arranged.

He then turned to the master and mistress of the house, who came forward immediately. He renewed the words of gratitude he had conveyed through the priest, and asked whether they wouldn't mind providing shelter for a few days to the guests that God had sent them.

"Oh, yes, Your Grace," answered the woman, with a voice and a face that expressed far more than that curt reply, choked as it was by her embarrassment. But her husband, dumbstruck by the presence of such a questioner, and the wish to distinguish himself on

such an important occasion, struggled to formulate a memorable response. He furrowed his brow, squinted his eyes, pursed his lips, strained the arc of his intellect with all his might, and sought, rummaged, and groped his way through a clutter of half-baked ideas and broken words. But time was running out. The Cardinal indicated that he understood the silence. The poor man opened his mouth, and all that came out was, "Think nothing of it!" Which is all he could think to say. As a result, not only was he mortified in the moment, but that awkward memory would return to spoil the pleasure of the great honor received for many years to come. And how many times, thinking back and reflecting on that circumstance, did he come up with, almost out of spite, any number of words that would have been superior to that inane "*Think nothing of it!*" But, as an old proverb says, you could fill the ditches with hindsight.

Then the Cardinal left, saying, "May the blessing of the Lord be upon this house."

That evening, he asked the village priest the most appropriate way to compensate the tailor—who could not have been rich—for a hospitality that had to be costly, especially in times like these. The priest replied that neither the earnings from his trade nor the income from some plots of land that the good tailor owned would have allowed him to be generous with others after this year's harvest. However, in truth, since he had set aside the surplus from the previous year, he was better off than most of his neighbors, and could easily handle some added expenses, and would certainly be happy to do so. Not to mention that he would never accept any payment for the favor.

"In all likelihood," said the Cardinal, "he has some people in his debt who can't afford to pay?"

"These poor people usually pay with their surpluses from the harvest, Your Grace. But last year nothing was left over, so everyone has far less than what they need."

"Well, then," said Federigo, "I will take care of those debts myself. And you will do me the favor of getting the promissory notes from him and settling the unpaid accounts."

"It will be a considerable sum."

"All the better. Unfortunately, you will also find some people who are too poor to have debts since they have no credit."

"Unfortunately is right! One does what one can: But how can we take care of everything in times like these?"

"Draw the amount from my account and reimburse the tailor well. In a year like this, anything that's not spent on food must seem excessive. But this is a special case."

I would not want to conclude the story of that day without giving you a brief account of how the Nameless One ended his own.

Word of his conversion had preceded his return to the valley. The news had traveled fast indeed, spreading shock, apprehension, torment, and grumbling. He indicated to the first bravi or servants (one and the same) he encountered that they should follow him home, and he repeated this order every step of the way. The bravi followed behind, with the usual deference and a new uncertainty. When the Nameless One and his ever-growing entourage reached the castle, he signaled to the men at the gate to fall in behind the others. He entered the first courtyard, went to its center, and there, astride his mule, let out a thunderous shout. It was the customary signal for everyone within earshot to come running. Those who had been scattered throughout the castle obeyed instantly, joining the others who were already gathered; all gazed up at the master.

"Meet me in the reception hall," he told everyone and watched them disperse from the height of his steed. Then he dismounted, led his mule into the stall by himself, and went to where he was awaited. The hubbub filling the hall died down the moment he appeared. Everyone moved to the side—they numbered about thirty in all—clearing a large space for him in the middle of the room.

The Nameless One raised his hand, as if to hold that sudden silence. He lifted his head, which towered above all the others, and spoke:

"Everyone, listen, and let no one speak unless called upon! My children! The road on which we have journeyed so far will lead to the depths of hell. It is not my wish to criticize you, I, who am the

prime, the worst offender. But hear what I have to say. God in His mercy has called upon me to change my ways. I shall, and I already have: May He do the same for all of you. Know, then, and hold it for certain that I have decided I would rather die than disobey His holy law. I release each one of you from the criminal commissions you have received from me. Do you understand me? Indeed, I order you not to carry them out. And make no mistake: From now on, no one will be allowed to do wrong under my protection and in my service. Whoever wishes to remain with me under these conditions will be like a son to me. And at the end of the day, I would be happy to know that even the least of you has had his fill, down to the last crust of bread in the house, before I myself have eaten. For those of you who do not want this, you will receive all the wages owed you, and also a gift. You are free to leave, but you can no longer set foot in this house unless it is to change your ways, in which case I will welcome you back with open arms. You have tonight to think this over. Tomorrow morning, I shall summon you, one by one, to hear your answer. And then I will give new orders. For now, retire, each man to his station. And may God, who has shown me such mercy, guide your thoughts."

At this he stopped, and everyone remained in silence, giving no outward appearance of the turbulent thoughts that might have been seething in their criminal minds. They were used to hearing their master's voice as the expression of a will that was not to be questioned. And that voice, announcing his change of heart, gave no indication of weakness. It did not occur to anyone to take advantage of his conversion and answer him as they would an ordinary man. In him, they saw a saint, but one of those saints depicted with their heads held high and a sword in their fist. Apart from their fear, they were, as his lieges, fond of him (especially those—the majority—who had been born on his estate). Their admiration filled them with goodwill, and in his presence, they felt what I would call the deference that even the most loutish and petulant feel before a man they recognize as their superior. So although the words they had just heard from his mouth were hostile to their ears,

they did not ring false or strange. While in the past his men might have made fun of such ideas a thousand times, it was not from disbelief but rather to deflect through humor the fear that would have gripped them if they had taken them seriously. And now, seeing the effect of that same fear in a man like their master, there was not a single person unaffected, some more, some less, at least for a good while.

The men who had found themselves outside of the valley that morning were the first to hear the great news. Together they had witnessed, and then reported, the joy and the fresh confidence of the people, the love and the veneration for the Nameless One that had penetrated what had once been a place of old hatred and old fear. To their amazement, they now saw the man whom they alone had always looked up to as the idol of the multitude. They still saw him as superior to others, but in a very different—though no lesser—degree than before; still towering over the common horde, still a leader among men.

So there they all stood, dumbfounded, each uncertain of the other, and each uncertain of himself. Some grumbled, some started to plan where they would seek shelter and employment. Some thought about whether they were capable of adapting to life as honest men. But there were also some who, touched by his words, felt a certain inclination. And some, without coming to a decision, planned to promise him anything, just to be on the safe side, all while devouring the bread offered so wholeheartedly—which was so scarce in those days. And to buy time no one breathed a word.

When the Nameless One, at the end of his speech, once again raised his imperious hand to signal that they should leave the room, they all filed out together, quietly quietly, like a herd of sheep. He, too, left the room, following behind them. Pausing in the middle of the courtyard, he observed how they scattered in the twilight, each returning to his station. Going upstairs to get a lantern, he circled the courtyards, the corridors, and the rooms once more. He inspected every entrance, and when he saw that all was quiet, he finally went to sleep. Yes, to sleep, because he was tired.

Although he had always gone in search of affairs that were complicated and urgent, never before, at any juncture, had he found himself with so many matters to handle. Yet he was tired. The remorse that had robbed him of sleep the night before, rather than settling down, was now calling out more loudly, more sternly, more absolutely. Yet he was tired. The order, the system of rule he had established so carefully within his realm for many years, through a unique combination of audacity and perseverance, he himself had now undermined with just a few words. The limitless service of his men, their willingness to do anything, that loyalty of thieves on which he had long relied, had been shattered by none other than himself. He had transformed his resources into a mountain of troubles, and sown confusion and doubt in his own home. Yet he was tired.

So he went to his room, approached the side of the bed where he had found so many thorns the night before, and knelt down with the intention of saying his prayers. In a deep recess of his mind, he rediscovered the prayers that he had learned as a child. He started to say them, and those words, which had remained tangled in a ball for so long, started to come one after the other, as if they were unraveling. He was filled with a combination of undefinable sentiments: a certain tenderness in the physical return to the habits of innocence, sharper pangs at the thought of the abyss he had placed between that time and this, a yearning to attain, through acts of atonement, a clearer conscience, a state closer to the innocence to which he could not return, and a gratitude toward and trust in the mercy that could lead him to that condition, and that had already given him so many signs of willingness. He then got up off his knees, went to bed, and fell asleep immediately.

And so ended that day, a day celebrated in the period when our anonymous scribe was writing. Nowadays, were it not for him, we would know nothing about this story—or at least none of the details—since Ripamonti and Rivola, whom I have quoted above, limit themselves to saying only that the notorious tyrant, after a meeting with Federigo, changed his life admirably and perma-

nently. But how many people have read their books? Even fewer than those who will read my own. And who knows whether, in the valley itself, among those still interested in seeking it, and capable of finding it, some faded, confused tradition of that event has survived. For so many things have happened between then and now!

Chapter 25

The next day, in Lucia's little village and throughout the Lecco territory, all the talk was of her, of the Nameless One, of the Archbishop, and of another fellow who, as much as he enjoyed having his name on everyone's lips, would, under the circumstances, have gladly dispensed with it: by which I mean his Lordship, Don Rodrigo.

Not that there hadn't been talk of his deeds before—but only secretly, in bits and pieces. Two people had to know each other quite well before they would broach the subject. Even then, they didn't fully express what they felt. Because, generally speaking, when people cannot give vent to indignation without grave danger, they not only express it less (if at all), they actually feel it less. But who could resist asking and conversing about such a sensational event, in which the hand of God had been witnessed, and two such remarkable characters had made such a remarkable impression? One man who combined a zeal for justice with great authority, the other, in whom violence personified seemed to have been brought to its knees, as criminality laid down its weapons, so to speak, and sued for peace. Don Rodrigo, by comparison, was insignificant. Now everyone could see clearly how he had harassed innocence in order to dishonor and persecute it with such brazen insistence, such atrocious violence, and such abominable treachery. Now his many other feats were criticized, and in their regard, encouraged by the general consensus, people said what they felt. But in a whisper, with a shudder, and from a distance, since he was still surrounded by bravi.

Much of the public censure also fell on his friends and toadies.

The Mayor—who had always been deaf, dumb, and blind to the tyrant's deeds—was derided, but out of earshot, for while he had no bravi, he did have the police. Similar regard was not accorded to Professor Argle-Bargle—whose only armor was empty talk and deception—and other lackeys of his ilk; they were subjected to finger-pointing and accusing stares, till they concluded that it would be best not to show their faces in public for a while.

Don Rodrigo, stunned by this unthinkable development, so different from the news he had been expecting just one day ago, just one moment ago, remained holed up in his palace, seething for two days, alone but for his bravi. On the third day, he left for Milan. Matters had gotten too out of hand. He wanted to confront the local gossip, and even find an opportunity to make an example of someone, especially the most brazen offenders. But when he learned that the Cardinal was also paying a visit to his territory, he was forced to leave. The Count Uncle, who knew only as much about the affair as Attilio had told him, would certainly expect Don Rodrigo to cut a prominent figure at such an occasion and be accorded the most distinguished public reception from the Cardinal. That's what his uncle would expect, together with a full report, since this was an important opportunity to show the esteem in which a leading authority held the family. But now everyone could see the direction things had taken. To escape such a thorny predicament, Don Rodrigo got up one morning before dawn and climbed into a carriage, which was guarded on every side by Griso and other bravi. He left orders for the rest of his household to follow, and departed like a fugitive, like Catiline from Rome (if I may be permitted to elevate our characters through an illustrious comparison), fuming and swearing that he would soon be back, in a different guise, to take revenge.*

* *The War with Catiline* (*Bellum Catilinae*), by the Roman historian Sallust (86–35/34 B.C.E.), relates the conspiracy of the Roman nobleman Catiline, who was forced to flee the city in 63 B.C.E. when the plot was discovered, and vowed to return with an army.

As this unfolded, the Cardinal was visiting a different parish every day in the Lecco territory. On the date he was due to arrive in Lucia's village, most of the townsfolk gathered in the street to meet him. At the entrance to the village, right next to the cottage of Agnese and Lucia, a triumphal arch was built of upright stakes, with poles laid across the top, covered with straw and moss, and festooned with green boughs of butcher's broom and holly speckled with scarlet berries. The church façade was adorned with tapestries. Blankets and bed linens were hung from every window, while babies' swaddling clothes were arranged like banners: For better or worse, this is all that they had available to create a sense of abundance, and the little needed to create, for better or for worse, the impression of excess. At around three in the afternoon, the hour at which the Cardinal was expected, those who had stayed at home—primarily the elderly, women, and children—also set out to meet him, some in an orderly procession, others in little clusters. At the head of the assembly was Don Abbondio, grumpy in the midst of so much festivity because of the confounding racket, the masses of people whose teeming, as he kept repeating, made his head spin, and the inner dread that Agnese and Lucia had spilled the beans, and he would have to account for the unperformed marriage.

All of a sudden, the Cardinal, or rather, the crowd surrounding his sedan chair as well as his entourage, appeared. The only visible indication of his presence was in the air above everyone's heads: the tip of the cross borne by the chaplain who was astride a mule. The people walking alongside Don Abbondio raced ahead to reach the larger crowd. After repeating three or four times, "Slowly now. Single file. What are you doing?" he turned around irritably, continuing to grumble, "What a ruckus. What a ruckus," and entered the still-empty church to wait there.

The Cardinal came forward, blessing the people with his hand, while the people blessed him with their words. It was all his entourage could do to hold back the crowd. Since this was Lucia's village, the people wanted to do something extraordinary for the

Archbishop—no easy task, since everywhere he went, the people strove to outdo themselves. From the very start of his appointment, upon his first solemn entrance into the Duomo, the crowd had rushed toward him so forcefully as to raise fears for his life. The gentlemen closest to him had to unsheathe their swords to frighten and drive back the swarm of people. This was an era of so much unruliness and violence that even a demonstration of goodwill to a bishop in a church—and the attempts to control it—could come close to killing him. And even that defense would not have sufficed if two young priests robust in body and spirit—Clerici and Picozzi, the Master and Deputy Master of Ceremonies—had not lifted him up on their arms and carried him bodily from the door of the cathedral to the high altar. Ever since then, during his many episcopal visits, his first entry into any church was likely to be—and I'm not exaggerating—one of his most fatiguing, and sometimes most dangerous pastoral duties.

He entered the church as best he could. He went up to the altar, and after standing in prayer for a few minutes, he made his customary remarks to the people about his love for them, his desire for their salvation, and his instructions on the services for the next day. Then he retired to the pastor's house, where he inquired, among other things, about Renzo. Don Abbondio replied that the youth was a little rambunctious, a little headstrong, a little quick-tempered. But in response to more detailed and precise questions, he had to admit that Renzo was an honest lad, and that he, too, could not understand how he could have gotten into all the mischief he was accused of in Milan.

"And the girl," the Cardinal continued, "do you think it would be safe for her to come and stay in her house again?"

"For the moment, she can come and stay, if she prefers," replied Don Abbondio. "For the moment," he repeated with a sigh. "But Your Grace would always need to be here, or at least nearby."

"The Lord is always near," said the Cardinal. "Nevertheless, I'll arrange for her to stay someplace safe." And he immediately gave

instructions for a sedan chair with an escort to be sent early the next day to fetch Agnese and Lucia from the tailor's house.

Don Abbondio left the room feeling pleased that the Cardinal had spoken to him about the two young people without demanding an account of his own refusal to marry them. "So he knows nothing," he said to himself. "Agnese must have kept her mouth shut. What a miracle! They are supposed to be seeing each other again, it's true, but I'll remind her of what I said, I will." What he didn't know, poor man, is that Federigo had not brought up the subject precisely because he intended to speak with him at greater length when he had a moment. The Cardinal wanted to hear the priest's explanations before coming to any conclusion.

But the good prelate's plans of getting Lucia to safety were to become superfluous. After he left her, certain developments arose that I should relate.

During the few days the two women had spent at the tailor's hospitable cottage, they had each resumed their former lifestyle as best they could. Lucia had immediately asked for some work to do, and, as in the convent, she sewed and sewed, secluded in a little room far from the eyes of others. Sometimes Agnese would go out, sometimes she would join in her daughter's work. Their conversations were becoming more somber but also more affectionate. They were each preparing for their separation, since the lamb could not return to living so close to the den of the wolf. When and how would this separation end? For one of them in particular, the future was unclear, complicated. Agnese, meanwhile, kept spinning her optimistic conjectures: If nothing bad had happened to him, Renzo would eventually send news of how he was doing, if he had found work and a place to settle. And if (who could doubt?) he had kept his vow, then why couldn't they go live with him? Again and again, she shared these hopes with her daughter, for whom I couldn't say whether it was harder to listen or to reply. Lucia had kept her great secret to herself, and although it was uncomfortable to deceive her good mother—and not for the only time—she was held back, al-

most invincibly, by shame and the various fears I have mentioned, so she lived day in and day out without saying a word. Her plans were quite different from her mother's, or rather, she had no plans at all. She had placed herself in the hands of Providence. So she tried to ignore her mother's musings or change the subject. Or she would say, vaguely, that she no longer had any hope or desire for the things of this world, only to soon be reunited again with her mother. Most of the time, her tears arrived at just the right moment to keep her from speaking any further.

"Do you know why you think that way?" Agnese would say. "It's because you've suffered so much, and you can't believe that things might turn out right in the end. Let's leave it in God's hands, and if . . . Allow yourself to see a glimmer, just a glimmer, of hope, and then you can tell me if you've stopped thinking about him." Lucia kissed her mother and wept.

In the meantime, a close friendship had blossomed between the two women and their hosts. And why would it not between the benefited and benefactors, when all are good people? Agnese especially enjoyed long chats with the mistress of the house. For his part, the tailor entertained them with stories or moral tales, especially at the table, where he always had an interesting excerpt to relate from Bevis of Hampton or the Desert Fathers.*

Not far from the village, a well-heeled couple, Don Ferrante and Donna Prassede, were taking their vacation (our anonymous author, as usual, has left out their family name). Donna Prassede was an elderly noblewoman with a strong propensity for good deeds, certainly the worthiest profession a person can exercise, but which can unfortunately—like all the others—also make matters worse. To do good, you have to be able to recognize it, and as in anything, the only way we can recognize it is through our personal passions, judgments, and ideas, which are often limited. There is a saying

* These figures are from the chivalric romances and hagiographies that the tailor loved to read. The Desert Fathers were early Christian hermits while Bevis of Hampton was a character in *The Matter of France.*

that, when it comes to friends, you should have very few, but to those few be very close. Donna Prassede applied the same rule to ideas: including, unfortunately, many that were bad, which were not the ones she cherished the least. Thus, she would submit as "good" causes that were not, or adopt methods that might instead cause harm, or believe to be legitimate things that were nothing of the sort, because of a confused assumption that someone who goes beyond the call of duty is entitled to go beyond what is right. She would not see the truth of a matter, or she would see things that just weren't there, and make many similar misjudgments, which can and does happen to everyone, even the best of us. But to Donna Prassede they happened far too often, and not infrequently, all together.

When she heard the big story about Lucia, and everything being said about her, Donna Prassede was gripped by a curiosity to see the girl for herself. She sent a carriage with an elderly squire to fetch mother and daughter. Lucia shrugged her shoulders and asked the tailor, who was acting as their emissary, to find a way to excuse them. As long as he was dealing with ordinary people who wanted to meet the miracle girl, the tailor was happy to comply. But in this case, refusal sounded more like rebellion to him. He made a big fuss, exclaiming any number of things aloud: This was no way to behave; it was an important family; one doesn't say no to aristocrats; this could make their fortune; not to mention that Donna Prassede, in addition to everything else, was a saint. So many things, in short, that Lucia had to give in, especially since Agnese backed up all his arguments with her own iterations of, "Well, he's right."

When mother and daughter arrived before the lady, she made a great show of welcoming and congratulating them. She asked questions and dispensed advice, all with a certain air of innate superiority, but corrected by expressions of humility, tempered by shows of concern, and seasoned with so much spirituality that Agnese, almost immediately, and Lucia, soon after, started to feel a lifting of the oppressive deference they had initially felt in the presence of nobility. Indeed, they now found her appealing. To make a long story short, Donna Prassede, hearing that the Cardinal had taken it upon

himself to find shelter for Lucia, and struck by the desire to second and, at the same time, precede his good intentions, offered to take the girl into her own household where, without being assigned any particular task, she could help the other girls with their work at her pleasure. She added that she would handle informing His Grace.

In addition to the obvious and immediate good of this gesture, Donna Prassede saw and settled on another, which, in her opinion, was more worthy of consideration: to correct a wayward mind, to place on the path of righteousness someone who greatly needed it. From the moment she had first heard talk of Lucia, she was convinced that a young girl who could become engaged to a ne'er-do-well, a troublemaker—a jailbird in short—must have some hidden flaw or vice, since birds of a feather . . . Lucia's visit had confirmed this conviction. Not that she didn't look like what passes for a good girl. Still, there was much to find fault with. That lowered head, that chin nailed to the hollow of her throat, that reluctance to answer questions, or barely answering them, as if she were forced, might indicate modesty, but they were also a clear sign of obstinacy: It was not hard to imagine that her little head had ideas of its own. And that constant blushing, those repressed sighs . . . and those two big eyes, which Donna Prassede did not like at all. She was certain, as if she had received it on good authority, that Lucia's troubles were a punishment from heaven for her friendship with that ne'er-do-well, and a warning that she should break it off. She therefore channeled her efforts toward just such a happy goal. Since, as she often told others and herself, her purpose in life was to second the will of heaven (but she often made the mistake of confusing the will of heaven with her own). She was careful, however, to not even hint at this second intention. For it was another one of her maxims that, in order to do what's good for a person, the first rule, in most cases, is not to tell them what you have planned.

Mother and daughter looked each other in the face. Given the painful need to separate, the offer seemed acceptable to both, if only because Donna Prassede's villa was so close to their little village. In the worst of cases, they would still be near each other and

able to spend the next holiday together. Seeing the consent in each other's eyes, they turned to Donna Prassede with the appreciation that signifies acceptance. The noblewoman renewed her kindness and promises, and said that she would immediately prepare a letter for them to show the Cardinal.

After the two women left, Donna Prassede had Don Ferrante write a draft. Since he was an educated man (as I will describe in more detail), she used him as her secretary for important occasions. This being just such an occasion, Don Ferrante invested it with all of his learning and, as he handed his spouse the draft for her to copy, he emphasized the orthography, one of the many subjects he had studied, and one of the few over which he held the upper hand in that house. Donna Prassede copied it diligently, and had the letter forwarded to the tailor. This all occurred two or three days before the Cardinal sent the sedan chair to bring the women back to their home village.

Upon their arrival, Agnese and Lucia got off at the parish house, where the Cardinal was waiting. Instructions had been given to show them in immediately. The first person to see them was the chaplain, who, while carrying out the orders, detained them just long enough to hastily advise them on the protocols to be observed with His Grace and the correct forms of address, as he tended to do whenever the Cardinal wasn't looking. It was a constant source of frustration for the poor man to see the scant attention paid to such details in the Cardinal's orbit. "All because that blessed soul is too kind," he told other members of the household. "Too familiar." And he would relate how, with his own ears, he had heard people responding to the Cardinal with a "yes, sir, no, sir."

At that moment, Federigo was discussing parish affairs with Don Abbondio, leaving the priest no room to issue his own private instructions to the women, as he would have preferred. The only thing he did manage to do was to give them a look as he passed by them on his way out and their way in, to hint that he was pleased with them, and that they should continue, like good girls, to say nothing.

After the first welcomes from one side, and the first curtsies from the other, Agnese removed the letter from beneath her blouse and presented it to the Cardinal, saying, "This is from Donna Prassede, who says that she knows Your Grace well, since, of course, among nobles, I guess you all know one another. When you've read it, you'll see."

"That will be fine," said Federigo, after he had read it and managed to extract its meaning from the flowery rhetoric of Don Ferrante. He knew that family well enough to be sure that Lucia had been invited with the best intentions, and that there she would be safe from the intrigues and violence of her tormentor. As for his opinion of Donna Prassede, we do not know. In all likelihood, she is not the person he would have chosen for this task, but it was not his habit, as I have said or implied elsewhere, to undo the arrangements made by others in order to redo them better.

"Accept in peace this new separation, and the uncertainty in which you find yourselves." He added, "Have faith that this will soon be over, and that the Lord will guide things to the end for which He seems to have destined them. But of one thing you may be sure: He only wishes what is best for you." He gave Lucia in particular some loving advice, and to both women some words of comfort. Then he blessed them and sent them on their way. The minute they stepped outside, they were greeted by a swarm of friends. The whole village seemed to be waiting for them, and they were led home in triumph. The women vied with one another in congratulations, sympathy, and questions; they exclaimed their sadness at hearing that Lucia would be leaving the next day. The men competed with one another in volunteering services: Each one wanted to stand guard over their cottage that night. This fact inspired our anonymous author to formulate a proverb: If you don't want too many helpers, then try not to need them!

This warm welcome left Lucia flustered and dismayed; Agnese was not so easily perturbed. Ultimately, it was also good for Lucia, taking her mind off the thoughts and memories that were sadly re-

awakened on that doorstep, in those rooms, and at the sight of every object, even in the midst of compliments.

When the bell struck announcing the start of Mass, everyone headed to the church, and the walk there became yet another triumphal procession for the two women.

After the Mass ended, Don Abbondio, who had rushed home to make sure that Perpetua had everything prepared for the meal, was summoned by the Cardinal. He went immediately to his distinguished guest who, as he approached, intoned, "Reverend Father." These words were uttered in a manner that left no doubt that they were the start of a long and serious conversation. "Reverend Father, tell me, why did you not join in marriage that poor girl Lucia with her fiancé?"

"They must have spilled the beans this morning," Don Abbondio said to himself. By way of a reply, he mumbled, "Your Grace will have heard talk of the commotion caused by that affair. It was so confusing that, even today, it's hard to get a clear picture. As Your Grace himself can see, the girl is here, after many misfortunes, almost by miracle. As for the young man, after misfortunes of his own, no one knows where he is."

"What I am asking," the Cardinal continued, "is whether it is true that, before all these things happened, you refused to celebrate their marriage when they asked you to, on the scheduled day, and, if so, why."

"The truth is . . . if Your Grace only knew . . . the threats . . . the terrible orders I was given not to talk . . ." At this, he stopped without completing his sentence, intimating respectfully that it would be indiscreet to question him any further.

"But!" said the Cardinal, in a voice and with a solemn air that was not his custom. "This is your Bishop who, to perform his duty and to justify your behavior, is asking you why you did not do what the rules required you to do."

"Your Grace," said Don Abbondio, shrinking into himself, "I didn't mean to say . . . It's just that I thought, it being so messy, an

old story for which there was no remedy, that there was no point bringing it up . . . But, but, I can say . . . I know that Your Grace would not want to betray his poor pastor. Because, you see, in these parts, Your Grace cannot be everywhere, and I am stuck here, defenseless . . . But if you order me to, I'll tell you, I'll tell you everything."

"Then tell me. I would like nothing better than to find you blameless."

Don Abbondio therefore proceeded to tell the sad story, leaving out the most important name, however, and replacing it with "a powerful lord," thus giving to prudence what little he could in such a bind.

"And you had no other reason?" asked the Cardinal after Don Abbondio had finished.

"Perhaps I did not make myself clear," the priest answered. "At pain of death, I was ordered not to celebrate that marriage."

"And did you think that was a good enough reason for you to fail to perform a specific duty?"

"I have always tried to do my duty, no matter how much it inconvenienced me, but when it is a question of life . . ."

"And when you were ordained into the Church," Federigo said, in an even more solemn tone, "to assume the burden of the priesthood, did the Church safeguard your life? Did it tell you that the duties of the priesthood are free from every obstacle, immune from all danger? Did it perhaps tell you that your duties ended where danger began? Did it not tell you the opposite instead? Did it not warn you that you were being sent forth as a lamb among wolves? Did you not know there were violent men who might not be happy with the instructions you would be given? He who gave us His teachings and example—which we imitate in being called and in calling ourselves shepherds—when He descended to earth in fulfillment of the prophecy, did He make it a condition that His life be saved? Did He need the sacrament of Holy Orders to save His life, to preserve it for a few more days on earth, at the expense of charity and duty? Did He need the laying on of hands, the holy chrism? Let

the world profess this virtue and teach this doctrine. What am I saying? Oh, for shame! Because the world rejects this virtue, and makes its own laws prescribing evil and good. The world has its own gospel—a gospel of pride and hatred—which does not accept love for life as a reason to disobey its commandments. It will not have this: It will be obeyed! And us? We children and preachers of the promise? What would become of the Church if all of your brothers used similar language? What would become of the Church if She had come into the world with such doctrines?"

Don Abbondio hung his head. In the middle of these arguments, his spirit was like a chick between the talons of a hawk, dangling above an unknown region, high up in an air which he had never breathed. Realizing that he had to answer in some way, he said, with a certain forced humility, "Your Grace, I may be wrong. If a man's life counts for nothing, then I don't know what to say. But when you have to deal with certain people, powerful men, who will not listen to reason, even if I wanted to be brave, I don't know what could be gained by it. He's a man, the one I'm talking about, who you can't defeat or even appease."

"Do you not know that suffering for the sake of justice is our victory? And if not, what do you preach? What do you have to teach? What *good tidings* do you have to bring the poor? Does anyone expect you to defeat force through force? One question you will never be asked, on that day, is whether you succeeded in making the powerful do their duty; you have been given neither the mission nor the means to do so. But you will certainly be asked whether you have used all the means in your power to do what you were ordained to do, even when the powerful had the temerity to forbid you from doing so."

"These saints are odd," Don Abbondio thought. "The gist of what he is saying is that he cares more about the love of two young people than the life of a poor priest." He would have been happy for their conversation to end there. But he could see that at every pause, the Cardinal seemed to be expecting a reply: a confession, an excuse, anything.

"I can only repeat," he then said, "that I might be wrong, Your Grace . . . But it's hard to be brave when you're not."

"So then why, may I ask, did you take a vow to enter a ministry that requires you to do battle with the passions of this world? How did you not realize that, in this ministry, regardless of conditions, courage would be required to fulfill your obligations, and that there was Someone who would give it to you, unfailingly, if you asked Him? Do you believe those millions of martyrs were innately courageous? That they thought, innately, that their lives didn't count? The many young people who had just started to enjoy life; the many old people used to complaining that their lives would be over too soon; the many maidens, wives, and mothers? They all found courage, because courage was required, and they had faith. Knowing your own weakness and duties, did you not think to prepare yourself for the difficult moments in which you might find yourself, in which you did, in effect, find yourself? Ah, if during your many years of pastoral responsibilities, you had loved your flock (and how could you not?), if you had invested all of your heart, your cares, and your pleasures in them, then you wouldn't have been lacking courage when you needed it: For love is intrepid. If you had loved those entrusted to your spiritual care, those whom you call your children, then—of course!—when you saw two of them being threatened alongside yourself, just as the weakness of the flesh made you fear for yourself, love would have made you fear for them. You would have been humbled by your initial fear, because it stemmed from your weakness. You would have prayed to God for the strength to overcome that fear, to drive it away, as a temptation. But the holy and noble fear for others, for your own children, that you would have heeded. It would have given you no peace, aroused you to action, forced you to think, to do everything in your power to protect them from the danger looming over them . . . What did this fear inspire in you? Love? What did you do for them? What did you think of doing?"

Federigo fell silent, as if awaiting a reply.

Chapter 26

At this, Don Abbondio, who had struggled to answer less pointed questions, was left speechless. And, to tell the truth, even I—manuscript before me and pen in hand, contending only with words and fearing only the criticism of my readers—even I feel a certain reluctance to go on. For there is something unsettling about this effortless deploying of so many fine exhortations: to fortitude and charity, to diligent caring for others and boundless self-sacrifice. But when I realize that all this was said by a man who actually practiced them, I forge bravely ahead.

"You have nothing to reply?" asked the Cardinal. "Ah, if you had only done what charity and duty demanded of you. No matter how things ended, you wouldn't be standing here now without an answer. See for yourself what you've done: You heeded the call of evil rather than the demands of duty. You heeded it promptly. Evil appeared before you to issue its orders but wished to remain concealed from those who could have guarded against it and protected themselves. It didn't want anyone to know. It wanted secrecy, so it could be at liberty to nurture its schemes of treachery and violence. It ordered you to transgress and keep silent: You transgressed and did not speak.

"Now I am asking if there is more. Admit if you made up excuses for refusing to marry the young couple in order to conceal the true reason." Here he paused, still waiting for an answer.

"The bigmouths must have reported that to him, too," thought Don Abbondio, but he gave no sign of having something to say, so the Cardinal went on.

"If it's true that you lied to those poor children and kept them in the dark, ignorant, right where evil wanted them . . . then you leave me no choice but to believe it. All I can do now is feel your shame and hope that you will grieve with me. Look where your attachment to worldly things has led you. (Good God! And you're still using it as an excuse.) It has led you—and feel free to dispute what I'm saying if I seem unjust; and if I do not, take my words as a salutary humbling—it has led you to deceive the weak and lie to your children."

"So that's the way of the world," said Don Abbondio to himself. "That hellion"—he meant the Nameless One—"is welcomed with open arms. And me, all because of one white lie, which I told only to save my skin, I am subjected to this reproach. But they're our superiors, and our superiors are always right. My fate is to be pilloried with criticism from all sides, even from holy men." Speaking aloud he said, "I was wrong. I know I was wrong. But under the circumstances what was I supposed to do?"

"You still ask? Haven't I told you? Should I even have had to tell you? You were supposed to love, my son. To love and to pray. Then you would have known that evil might issue threats and strike blows, but it cannot command. You should have joined together, in accordance with the laws of God, what man wanted to put asunder. You should have administered to those unhappy innocents the sacrament they had every right to ask of you. God Himself would have kept you safe from the consequences, since you would have been following His path; but since you took another path, you are responsible for your own safety, and look at the consequences! Did you have no human defenses? Did you see no way out? Did you look for one, think of one, attempt one? If your poor charges had been married, they would have found a way out by themselves. They were ready to escape from the tyrant's reach and had already chosen a place of refuge. But even if they hadn't, did it not occur to you that you had a superior? A superior who, for all the world, would not have the authority to reprimand you for failing in your

duties, unless he also had the obligation to help you to fulfill them? Why did you not think to inform your bishop of the impediment that a sinister violence had placed on the exercise of your ministry?"

"Perpetua's very words!" thought Don Abbondio irritably. Throughout that long speech, the most vivid image to appear before him was that of the two bravi, together with the thought that Don Rodrigo was alive and well and, sooner or later, would return in glory and triumph and fury. And although the Cardinal's dignity, demeanor, and language filled him with confusion and fear, his fear neither overwhelmed him nor ultimately persuaded him to change his ways, since, in his mind, the Cardinal wielded no musket, no sword, and no bravi.

"How did you not realize," the Cardinal continued, "that if no other refuge was available to those poor oppressed innocents, I was always there to welcome them and get them to safety if you had sent them to me, sent the forsaken to a bishop as his children, not as a share of his burden but as a precious share of his riches? As for you, I would have been anxious for you. I wouldn't have been able to sleep until I was certain that not a hair on your head would be harmed. Did you not realize that I had the means to keep you safe? As for that boldest of men, did you not realize that his audacity would have evaporated the minute he found out that his schemes were known far away from here, that they were known to me, that I was following them, resolved to defend you using every means in my power? Did you not realize that, while men are frequently inclined to make promises they cannot keep, by the same token they threaten far more than they actually attempt? Did you not realize that evil is rooted not only in its strength but also in the credulity and terror of others?"

"The very things that Perpetua said," Don Abbondio thought again when he heard this, without reflecting that the agreement between his servant and Federigo Borromeo on what he could and should have done spoke volumes against him.

"But you," the Cardinal continued and concluded, "did not see and did not want to see anything other than your own temporal danger. Small wonder, then, that it seemed so great to you that you neglected everything else for its sake."

"It's because I am the one who saw those faces," Don Abbondio blurted out. "I am the one who heard their words. It's easy for Your Grace to speak, but put yourself in the shoes of a poor priest who found himself in that spot."

The moment he uttered these words, he bit his tongue. He realized that he'd let his irritation get the better of him, and said to himself, "Now I'll have the devil to pay!" But as he cast a dubious look upward, he was amazed to see in that man—whose thoughts he could never guess or understand—to see, as I was saying, his stern expression of reprimand soften to something more remorseful and pensive.

"Unfortunately," said Federigo, "such is our miserable and terrifying condition. Only God knows whether we ourselves are ready to offer what we must demand rigorously from others: We must judge, correct, reprimand. And only God knows what we ourselves would have done in such an instance, what we have done in similar instances! But I would be wrong to use my weakness as the measure of other men's duties, as the standard for my teaching! Yet I must undoubtedly not only teach others, but also set an example, unlike the scribes and pharisees, who lay heavy burdens on other men's shoulders, and will not lift a finger to help them.* And so, my son and brother, since others know the errors of those in authority better than they do themselves, if you feel I have been negligent in my duties—out of cowardice or in any respect—tell me so frankly, make me mend my ways. So that, if I have failed to set an example, I can at least make a confession. Reproach me freely for my weaknesses. Then the words I speak will carry more value, since you will

* The Cardinal is paraphrasing Matthew 23:4, "For they bind heavy and grievous burdens to be borne, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers."

hear more vividly that they do not belong to me, but rather to He who gives both you and me the strength we need to do what those words prescribe."

"Oh, what a holy man! But how he torments not just me," thought Don Abbondio, "but also himself. For not only must I wrack my brain, and criticize and interrogate myself, but so must he." Then he said aloud, "Your Grace, you must be joking. Who does not know the fortitude, the tireless zeal of your illustrious Lordship?" And he added to himself, "All too well!"

"I was not seeking your praise, which makes me tremble," said Federigo, "for God knows my shortcomings. The ones I know myself are already enough to humble me. But I would have liked—I would like—for us to be humbled together before Him, to pray together. I would like, out of my love for you, for you to understand how contrary your behavior was, and how contrary your language is, to the laws which you preach, and by which you shall be judged."

"So it's all my fault," said Don Abbondio. "But these people who reported me to you, didn't they tell you how they snuck into my house through treachery, to catch me off guard and contract a marriage against the rules?"

"They did tell me, my son. But it pains me, it saddens me, that you are still making excuses; that you want to excuse yourself by accusing others; and that the substance of that accusation should instead be part of your confession. But who instilled in them, not the need, but rather the temptation to do so? Would they have attempted that unlawful means if the legitimate one had not been barred to them? Attempted to trick their pastor if he had instead welcomed them with open arms, helped them, counseled them? Tried to surprise him, if he had not hidden from them? And you would blame them for this? Indignant that, after so much misfortune—what am I saying?—that in the midst of their misfortune, they poured out their hearts to their and your pastor? While the world may not want to hear the appeals of the oppressed, the complaints of the afflicted, but does that mean that we should not? And what good would it have done you if they had remained silent?

Did you not consider that their case in its entirety will be judged by God? Is there not yet another reason to love them (and you already have so many), in the fact that they have given you the chance to hear the sincere voice of your bishop, given you the means to see more clearly and atone, in part, for your great debt toward them? Even if they had provoked you, offended you, tormented you, I would still tell you (would I have to?) to love them for this very reason. To love them because they have suffered, because they still suffer, because they are your children, because they are weak, because you need forgiveness, and their prayers will help you immensely to receive it."

Don Abbondio was quiet. But it was no longer a forced, impatient silence. He was quiet like a man who has more to ponder than to say. The words he had just heard were unexpected consequences, and new applications, of a doctrine he had studied long ago, but which was still present, undisputed, in his mind. The suffering of others—which he'd always ignored because of fear for himself—appeared to him in a new way. And although he did not feel the full remorse that the sermon had sought to instill in him (since that same fear was always there to defend him), he still felt it. He felt a certain disappointment in himself, a compassion for others, a mix of tenderness and humiliation. It was—if such a comparison can be allowed—like the damp broken wick of a candle that, presented to the flame of a large torch, initially smokes, sputters, and crackles, wanting nothing to do with it, but in the end, for better or worse, catches fire and burns. He would have beat his breast and wept were it not for the thought of Don Rodrigo. Still, he showed himself to be moved enough for the Cardinal to realize that his words had not been wasted.

"Now," the Cardinal continued, "the boy is a fugitive from his home, the girl is about to leave hers, and both have strong reasons for staying away, with no prospect of ever being reunited here, only hoping that God will reunite them elsewhere. Now, unfortunately, they don't need you. And you, unfortunately, have no chance to help them. Nor in our own limited view do I see any such possibil-

ity in the future. But who knows whether God in his mercy will provide you with such an opportunity? If He does, do not miss the opportunity! Seek it out, be vigilant, pray to Him to give you other chances."

"I shall not fail, Your Grace. Truly, I shall not fail," replied Don Abbondio in a voice which, in that moment, came straight from the heart.

"Oh, yes, my son, yes!" exclaimed Federigo. And with affectionate dignity, he concluded, "Heaven knows I would rather have spoken with you about other things. Both of us have already lived long lives. Heaven knows how hard it was for me to burden your old age with such reprimands, and how much happier I would have been for us to console each other over our common cares, our troubles, by speaking of the blessed hope that is so near to us both. May it please God that the words I have spoken today shall help us both. Do not behave in such a manner that on the Day of Judgment, I will have to account for having kept you in an office at which you had failed so miserably. Let us redeem the time, for midnight is near and the bridegroom cannot tarry. Let us keep our lamps lit.* Let us present our poor wretched hearts to God, so that He may fill them with His love, which atones for the past and safeguards the future, which fears and trusts, weeps and rejoices, with wisdom, and which always becomes the virtue we so sorely need."

At this he stood up to leave, and Don Abbondio followed after him.

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At this point the anonymous author advises us that this was not their only conversation, nor was Lucia their only subject, but that he had limited himself to this part of it, to avoid digressing too much from the main story. And that, for the same reason, he would

* The Cardinal paraphrases biblical references to wisdom in Ephesians 5:15–16, "See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil," and Matthew 25:1–13, "While the bridegroom tarried, they all slumbered and slept. And at midnight there was a cry made, Behold the groom cometh; go ye out to meet him."

not mention other notable things that Federigo said during his visit, nor his generosity, the disagreements patched up, the feuds between individuals, families, and entire territories that were either settled or briefly suppressed (which was far more frequent, unfortunately), nor the bringing to heel of a bravo or petty tyrant, for his entire life or just a short spell. Things that always occurred, to a greater or lesser extent, in every part of the diocese where that excellent man would visit.

He does go on to tell us that, the next morning, Donna Prassede arrived at the appointed time to fetch Lucia and pay her respects to the Cardinal, who praised the girl and recommended her warmly. Lucia took leave of her mother—you can imagine her tears—and departed from her home. For the second time she bid farewell to her village, with that sense of double bitterness that one feels in leaving a place that was singularly beloved and can no longer be so. But she had not said her last goodbye to her mother, since Donna Prassede wished to stay a few more days at her villa, which was not very far. And Agnese promised her daughter that she would stop by, so they might wish each other an even sadder farewell.

The Cardinal was also ready to continue his tour when who should arrive for a word with him but the pastor of the parish to which the Nameless One's castle belonged. After being shown in, he presented a purse and a letter from the nobleman, asking Federigo to persuade Lucia's mother to accept the one hundred gold scudi in the purse, to be used as a dowry for the girl, or for whatever purpose she thought best. At the same time, he asked the Cardinal to tell them that, if they were ever in need of a favor, the poor girl knew where to find him, unfortunately, and that for him it would be a most welcome opportunity. The Cardinal immediately sent for Agnese and relayed the message, which she heard with equal parts pleasure and surprise. And he gave her the purse, which she accepted without too much fuss. "May God bless that gentleman," she said, "and I thank Your Eminence so, so much. Please don't say anything to anyone, because in a village like this . . . You'll have to forgive me, please understand. I know that a man of your

class doesn't go around gossiping about these things, but . . . I'm sure you understand."

She went home, quietly quietly. She locked herself in her room and opened the purse, but nothing could have prepared her for the sight of so many shiny new coins—all in a pile and all hers. She had never seen more than one at a time, and even then, only rarely. She counted them, struggling to stack them up neatly together, since they kept bulging out and slipping through her inexpert fingers. Once she finally managed to get them in a neat pile, she wrapped a rag around it, tied the bundle up tightly with string, and tucked it into a corner of her straw mattress. For the rest of the day, all she did was mull things over, daydreaming, making plans for the future, and longing for the days to come. After turning in for the night, she remained awake for a spell, her thoughts keeping company with the coins on which she was lying. After she fell asleep, she saw them in her dreams. At dawn, she got up and set off immediately for the villa where Lucia was staying.

For her part Lucia, although no less reluctant to bring up the issue of her vow, was determined to embark on a conversation with her mother that would be their last for many months.

As soon as they were alone, Agnese began, her face animated and her voice low, as if someone might be eavesdropping on them. "I have some wonderful news," and she told Lucia about their unexpected luck.

"May God bless him," said Lucia. "This way you'll be comfortable, and you can also do good for someone else."

"What?" exclaimed Agnese. "Don't you see the many things we can do with all that money? Listen. The only person I have in the world is you—and let me add, Renzo, since I've considered him like a son ever since the two of you started seeing each other. I only hope nothing bad's happened to him, since he's never sent word. Who says everything has to turn out for the worse, anyway? All we can do is hope. As for me, I'd have liked to lay my bones to rest in my own village, but now that you can't live there, thanks to that scoundrel . . . the very thought of him being nearby makes me hate

it. From the start, I was ready to accompany the two of you to the ends of the earth. And I always have been. But without money, how could we manage? Now do you understand? The pittance that our poor boy was able to scrape together through a lot of hard work and a lot of scrimping, well, in came justice and swept it all away. But, to make up for it, the Lord has sent us some good fortune. So, when Renzo figures out a way to let us know he's alive, and his whereabouts, and his intentions, I'll come myself to fetch you in Milan. Once upon a time, it would have felt like a long way, but adversity brings out the mettle in us. I've been as far as Monza, and I know what it's like to travel. I'll take a sensible man along with me, a relative, like Alessio from Maggianico, since, to be honest, there's slim pickings around here. I'll come with him, and pay all the expenses, and . . . Are you following me?"

Seeing that Lucia, rather than cheering up, was becoming gloomy, and showing only a joyless tenderness, Agnese stopped what she was saying and asked, "Child, what's wrong? Don't you agree?"

"My poor Mamma!" exclaimed Lucia, throwing her arms around Agnese's neck and burying her face in her bosom.

"What's the matter?" asked her mother anxiously.

"I should have told you before," replied Lucia, lifting her face and drying her tears, "but I didn't have the heart. Have pity on me!"

"Come now, tell me what it is."

"I can no longer be that poor boy's wife!"

"What? What are you saying?"

Lucia, with her head lowered and her breast heaving, sobbing without tears, like a person describing something, no matter how regrettable, that cannot be changed, revealed the story of her vow. At the same time, clasping her hands together, she begged her mother's forgiveness for not having spoken till then. She begged her not to tell a living soul, and to help her keep her vow.

Agnese was shocked and dismayed. She wanted to take offense at being kept in the dark, but thoughts of this grave situation over-

came her resentment. She wanted to say, "What have you done?" but it would have been like raging at heaven, especially when Lucia started to describe that night in the most vivid colors: the deep despair and the unexpected liberation in which the vow had been made so explicitly, so solemnly. While she spoke, Agnese remembered the various examples of strange and terrible punishments inflicted when a vow was broken that she had heard told over and over, and which she herself had told her daughter.

After a few moments in stunned silence, she asked, "What will you do now?"

"Now," replied Lucia, "it's up to God. It's up to God and the Blessed Mother. I have placed myself in their hands. They have not forsaken me yet, and they will not forsake me now that . . . The grace that I am asking of God, the only grace, after the salvation of my soul, is that He bring me back to you again. And He will grant me this, I know He will. That day . . . in that carriage . . . Oh Blessed Virgin! . . . Those men! . . . Who could have believed that they were taking me to the man who, in the end, would bring me back to you the next day?"

"But not to tell your mother of this vow right away!" scolded Agnese, with an annoyance tempered by affection and pity.

"Try to understand. I didn't have the heart . . . and what good would it have done to trouble you with this earlier?"

"And Renzo?" asked Agnese, shaking her head.

"Ah!" exclaimed Lucia with a start. "I mustn't think about that poor boy any more. You can see that it wasn't meant to be . . . It's as if God Himself wanted to keep us apart. And who knows . . . ? But no, no. He will have shielded him from harm, and will bring him better luck, without me."

"But in the meantime," her mother resumed, "if you hadn't gone and made that vow, and all the rest, and if nothing bad has happened to Renzo, then I could have fixed everything with that money."

"But would the money have even come to us," replied Lucia, "if

I hadn't experienced that night? God is the one who wanted things to turn out this way. His will be done." At this she broke down in tears.

Her unexpected argument left Agnese speechless. After a few moments, Lucia, swallowing her tears, picked up where she had left off. "What's done is done. Now we have to accept it wholeheartedly. And you, poor Mamma, you can help me, first by praying to God for your poor daughter, and then . . . that poor boy will have to be told. Could you take care of it, please, since you are able? When you find out where he is, have someone write to him, find a man . . . maybe your cousin Alessio, who's so prudent and charitable. He's always been fond of us, and he'll keep it to himself. Have him write down what happened, where I was taken, how I suffered, that this was God's will, and that he should resign himself, and that I can never ever belong to anyone. And break it to him gently, explain that I made a promise, that I took a vow. When he learns that I promised Our Lady . . . he's always had the fear of God in him. And as soon as you have news of him, have someone write to me, let me know he's safe. And then . . . tell me nothing more."

Touched by these words, Agnese assured her daughter that everything would be done as she wished.

"I have something else to tell you," Lucia continued. "If that poor boy hadn't had the misfortune of setting his mind on me, none of this would have happened to him. Now he's wandering the world. They cut off his livelihood. They took away his belongings, the money he had set aside, poor boy. You know why . . . And now we have so much! Oh, Mamma! Since the Lord has sent us so much abundance, and that poor boy—you really did treat him as your own . . . yes, as your own son. The two of you should split the money between you, since God will surely not abandon us. Look for a safe opportunity and send him the money. Heaven knows how much he needs it!"

"Do you think I wouldn't?" replied Agnese. "Of course I'll send it to him. Poor boy! Why do you think I was so happy to get the money? Well, I never . . . ! I was happy as could be on my way here.

Never mind. I'll send it to him, poor Renzo! But him, too . . . Listen to me. People who need money are happy to get it, but this money isn't going to make Renzo any better off."

Lucia thanked her mother for her prompt and generous acquiescence with a gratitude and an affection that would make any observer feel that Renzo still had a claim on her heart, perhaps more than she herself realized.

"How am I supposed to manage without you, my poor girl?" said Agnese with tears of her own.

"And I without you, my poor mamma? In the house of strangers? And down there in Milan . . . ! But the Lord will be with us both, and then He will reunite us. In eight or nine months we'll see each other again. And by then, and hopefully sooner, He will have arranged things so we can be together. Let's leave it in His hands. And I will keep praying and praying to Our Lady to bestow this grace upon us. If I had anything more to offer her, I would. But she is so merciful that she will grant it to me for nothing."

With these and other similar, repeated words of lament and reassurance, of regret and resignation, with many exhortations to say nothing and many promises not to, with many tears, and after long and renewed embraces, the women went their separate ways, each promising the other that they would meet again the following autumn at the latest. As if keeping the promise depended on them, but that is what people always say in such cases.

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Weeks went by, and Agnese couldn't find out anything about Renzo. No letter or message from him reached her, and none of her acquaintances in the village and its environs knew any more than she did.

She was not the only one to search for him in vain. Cardinal Federigo, who was not making an empty promise when he told the poor women that he would look into what had happened to the poor boy, had in fact written immediately for information. Back in Milan, he received a reply, telling him that the whereabouts of the person in question had not been found; that he had actually stayed

for a while at a relative's house, in a certain village, where he had not drawn attention to himself; but one morning, he had suddenly disappeared, and not even his relative knew where he was, and could only repeat certain vague and contradictory rumors, that the youth had enlisted for the Levant, crossed over to Germany, and drowned while fording a river; and that he would keep an eye out, and if more concrete news appeared, it would immediately be shared with His Most Illustrious and Reverend Eminence.

Later, these rumors and others also spread to the territory of Lecco, and consequently came to the attention of Agnese. The poor woman struggled to figure out what was true and get to the bottom of the different versions, but she could never get past affirmations of "People say" that, even nowadays, are considered adequate proof of many things. Sometimes, no sooner had she been told one story than another person would come by to say it was all lies, only to offer her a tale that was equally strange and sinister in exchange. But it was all gossip. Now for the facts:

The Governor of Milan and Captain-General of Italy, Don Gonzalo Fernández de Córdoba, made a commotion with the Resident of Venice to Milan, because a crook, a known scoundrel, a promoter of looting and murder—the notorious Lorenzo Tramaglino, who had incited a riot in order to escape from the grips of justice—had received welcome and hospitality in the territory of Bergamo. The Resident replied that it came as news to him, and that he would write to Venice in order to provide His Excellency with whatever explanation of the case was found.

In Venice, they made it a policy to support and encourage the inclination of Milanese silk-workers to move to the territory of Bergamo, and thus they assured that there were many benefits to doing so, particularly the one that mattered the most: security. In a dispute between two mighty litigants, however, a third person, no matter how small, has to pay the price. So Bortolo was warned secretly (it is not known by whom), that Renzo was not safe in his village, and should look for work at another factory, and also change his name for a while. Bortolo took the hint, asked no further ques-

tions, and ran to tell his cousin. He picked him up in a carriage and drove him to another silk-maker, about fifteen miles away, where he introduced him as Antonio Rivolta to the proprietor, an old acquaintance, who was also from the state of Milan. Although it was a lean year, the man did not have to be asked twice to hire a worker who had been recommended to him as honest and skilled by an upright person who knew the business. And when the new employee was put to the test, the proprietor had nothing but praise for him. Except for one thing: He thought the youth a bit dim-witted at first, since whenever he called out, "Antonio," he didn't always get an answer.

Shortly after, the Bergamo police commissioner received an order from Venice, delivered in a mild manner, telling him to collect and provide information on whether a certain subject was to be found in his jurisdiction, specifically in a certain town. The Captain, having done his duty to the best of his understanding, transmitted a negative reply, which was then transmitted to the Resident in Milan, who had it transmitted to the Grand Chancellor so that he might transmit it to Don Gonzalo Fernández de Córdoba.

There was no shortage of busybodies who wanted to know from Bortolo why the young man was no longer there, and where he had gone. To the first question Bortolo would reply, "Well, he just disappeared." To placate the more insistent, and keep them from suspecting the truth, he thought it best to mention one or the other of the reports mentioned above. But he professed no certainty, saying he was only repeating hearsay, and had no concrete proof.

But when he was asked the same question on behalf of the Cardinal—whose name was not divulged—with certain trappings of importance and mystery, insinuating that the interested party was a great personage, Bortolo became especially suspicious, and deemed it necessary to give his usual response. Indeed, since he was dealing with a great personage, he spit out—all in one go—every single one of the rumors he himself had spread on every previous occasion.

But don't go imagining that a man of Don Gonzalo's stature held

any kind of grudge against that poor little silk-worker from the mountains; or that, having learned of his lack of respect toward, and the awful words addressed to, his coat of arms, the one showing a Moorish king with chains around his neck, he wanted to retaliate; or that he thought Renzo was so dangerous that he needed to be pursued as a fugitive, and not be allowed to live even in exile (as the Roman Senate did with Hannibal).* Don Gonzalo had far more important things on his mind than to concern himself with Renzo's doings. And if he appeared to, it was only because, through a unique set of circumstances, without meaning to, or even realizing it (at the time or later), the poor boy found himself linked, by a very thin and invisible thread, to too many and too important things.

* After Hannibal's defeat by Scipio, which ended the Second Punic War (218–201 B.C.E.), he was forced to flee from Carthage to Ephesus, and then to Bithynia, where he committed suicide.

Chapter 27

More than once, I have had occasion to mention the war for succession that was then raging in the states of the late Duke Vincenzo Gonzaga, the second to bear that name, but I have always done so very hastily, in passing reference. Now, however, we are in need of more detailed information to understand our story. Anyone who knows their history will be familiar with these events. However, since my intuition tells me that this book will only be read by the ignorant, it might not be a bad idea for me to give a smattering of background information to those who need it.

I have already noted that, upon the death of the Duke, the first in the line of succession was Charles Gonzaga, head of a cadet branch of the family transplanted to France, where it held the Duchies of Nevers and Rethel. As first in line, he was enlisted to come into possession of Mantua, and of Montferrat, as well, a fact I omitted out of haste. The Court of Madrid wanted to keep the new prince out of these two fiefs at all cost (this I have mentioned), and needed a reason to do so (since it would be unjust to wage a war for no reason). Thus, the court declared that it would uphold the claim on Mantua of another Gonzaga, namely Ferrante, the Prince of Guastalla; and the claim on Montferrat of Charles Emmanuel I, the Duke of Savoy, and Margherita Gonzaga, Dowager Duchess of Lorraine.

Don Gonzalo—a descendant and namesake of El Gran Capitan, the great Spanish general Gonzalo Fernández de Córdoba (1453–1515)—probably agitated for a declaration of war more than anyone. He had already fought in Flanders and was all too eager to

do battle in Italy. But before the Court of Madrid had reached a decision, he interpreted its intentions and anticipated its orders by signing a treaty with the Duke of Savoy for the invasion and partition of Montferrat. After that it was easy to get the Prime Minister of Spain, the Count-Duke of Olivares, to ratify the treaty. He persuaded him that there would be no difficulty in taking Casale—the best-defended citadel in the section of Montferrat allotted to the King of Spain! In the name of the King, however, he declared that he had no intention of occupying the town except as a depository, while awaiting the Emperor's ruling. The Emperor, in the meantime—interceding in part on behalf of others, in part for reasons of his own—refused to allow Charles Gonzaga to take possession of Mantua, ordering the Duke to forfeit the disputed states to him. He would then consult the parties and decide who the rightful heir was. But the Duke would not agree.

You see, Nevers had influential friends of his own: Cardinal Richelieu, the Venetian senators, and the Pope (Urban VIII, as I have mentioned). But the Cardinal—busy with both the Siege of La Rochelle and a war with England, and opposed by the party of the Queen Mother, Marie de' Medici—had his own reasons for not favoring the House of Nevers. The most he could offer was hope. The Venetians did not want to make a move, or even take sides, until a French army had descended into Italy. Doing their best to help the Duke surreptitiously with the Court of Madrid and the Governor of Milan, they limited themselves to declarations, proposals, and exhortations (calm or menacing, depending on the circumstances). And while the Pope endorsed Nevers to his friends, interceded on his behalf with enemies, and came up with proposals for a settlement, he refused to hear any talk of sending men into battle.

The two allies for the offense were thus able to undertake the concerted operation even more confidently. The Duke of Savoy, for his part, entered Montferrat. Don Gonzalo laid siege to Casale enthusiastically, but things didn't go as well as he'd imagined. Don't go thinking that everything is roses in war. Madrid did not give him

the help he had wanted: In fact, it failed to provide him with the most basic needs. His ally was a little too helpful, by which I mean that, after taking his own share of Montferrat, the Duke of Savoy started helping himself to the area allotted to the King of Spain. Don Gonzalo was frustrated beyond compare, but he feared that if he protested, the Duke—who was as crafty and changeable in negotiations as he was valiant on the battlefield—might look to the French. So Don Gonzalo was forced to turn a blind eye, put up with him, and keep his mouth shut.

In addition, the siege was going badly, dragging on and sometimes losing ground because of the solid, vigilant, and determined resistance of the besieged; Don Gonzalo's lack of men; and, according to some historians, his many blunders. I won't argue with them, and should this be true, I am even willing to find it beautiful if, for that reason, one fewer man was left dead, wounded, or maimed, and *ceteris paribus*—all things being equal—the roof tiles of Casale were to suffer a little less damage. It was at this juncture that Don Gonzalo received news of the riots in Milan and rushed off to be there in person.

There, among the things reported to him, was the rebellious and clamorous escape of Renzo, and the events—both true and alleged—that led to his arrest. He was also told that the youth had taken refuge in the territory of Bergamo. This circumstance caught the attention of Don Gonzalo. From another source, he was informed that in Venice they were overjoyed by the Milan uprising; that, at first, they had believed Don Gonzalo would be forced to lift the siege of Casale; and that, regardless, they thought he himself was in a state of shock and deeply troubled, especially since the news of the surrender of La Rochelle—longed for by the Venetians and dreaded by him—came immediately after the riots. Offended—as a man and as a politician—that these gentlemen should entertain such a notion, he sought every opportunity to prove that he had lost none of his former confidence (since to openly say, "I'm not afraid," is as good as saying nothing at all).

One good strategy is to feign outrage, pick a quarrel, or protest.

So when the Venetian Resident came by to pay his respects—and at the same time to investigate how Don Gonzalo was feeling, from the expression on his face and from his manner (take note of everything: Such is the subtle old art of diplomacy)—Don Gonzalo, after skimming over the subject of the riots as if he had already put the whole matter behind him, then made the commotion about Renzo that you've heard about, just as you've heard, too, all that happened as a result. After that, he no longer concerned himself with such a trivial and, to his mind, concluded business. And later—which was quite a while later—when the reply reached the camp above Casale, where he had returned, and where he had other things on his mind, he looked up and shook his head, like a silkworm searching for a mulberry leaf. He stood there for a moment, trying to get a vivid picture of an event that was buried in shadows. Then he remembered the character in question, recalled Renzo vaguely and fleetingly, moved on to another matter, and didn't give the boy a second thought.

From the little that Renzo had been able to infer, however, he must have assumed anything other than benign neglect. For several months, he had no other thought, or rather, no other concern, than to live in hiding. Of course he longed to send his news to the women and to hear theirs. But there were two major difficulties. First, that he would have to confide in a scribe, since the poor boy did not know how to write, or even read, in the broad sense of the word. And if, when asked, he claimed that he did, as he did, you might recall, with Professor Argle-Bargle, it wasn't a boast or bluster. He could indeed read printed pages if he took his time, but handwriting was another kettle of fish. So he would be forced to share his business and his jealously guarded secret with a third person, and in those days, it wasn't easy to find someone who could both wield a pen and be trusted, especially in a village where he had no old acquaintances. The second difficulty was to find a messenger, a man who was traveling to the same area and would be willing to take the letter and make sure that it reached its destination. All qualities that are likewise difficult to find in a single person.

Finally, after looking long and hard, he found someone to write for him. But not knowing whether the women were still in Monza, or where they might be, he thought it best to enclose the letter for Agnese inside one addressed to Fra Cristoforo. The scribe also agreed to find someone to deliver the envelope. He gave it to a man who was supposed to be passing not far from Pescarenico. The man left it at a roadside inn near the final destination, with careful instructions. Since the envelope was addressed to a monastery, it arrived, but what happened to it next no one would ever know. Receiving no reply, Renzo had another letter written, more or less like the first, and enclosed it with another missive, addressed, perhaps, to a friend or relative in Lecco. He looked for and found another carrier. This time, the letter reached the person for whom it was meant. Agnese ran to Maggianico, where her cousin Alessio read and explained it to her. Together, they agreed on a response, which he put down on paper. She found a way to send it to Antonio Rivolta at his place of residence. The whole process took much longer than I make it sound, however. Renzo received her reply and had another letter written back. In short, a correspondence began between the two that was neither quick nor regular, but that, amid fits and starts, was ongoing.

To get a sense of their exchange, you should know a little about how the system functioned, or rather how it still does, because in this particular matter, I believe that little to nothing has changed.

The peasant who cannot write, and needs something written, goes looking for a person who knows the art, and chooses someone, as best he can, from among members of his own class, since he is intimidated by others or doesn't trust them. He explains the background, with some degree of order and clarity, and in the same fashion, he dictates what needs to be put down on paper. The writer, in equal parts understanding and misunderstanding, offers some advice, proposes a few changes, and says, "Leave it to me." He picks up his pen, puts down the other person's thoughts in written form as best he can, corrects them, improves them, emphasizes some parts, and softens or leaves out others, depending on what he thinks

sounds best; because—there's no escaping it—a man who knows more than others does not want to be a tool in their hands. When he delves into their business, he wants to do things slightly in his own way. Still, the writer does not always manage to say everything he means. Sometimes he even ends up saying the opposite; the same thing also happens to me when I write for the press.

When a letter composed in such a manner reaches the addressee, who, like the sender, is also unschooled in the ABC's, he or she must turn to another learned man of similar status to read and explain the message. Questions over interpretation arise since the recipient, who is familiar with the background, claims that certain words mean one thing, while the reader, based on his experience with composition, claims that they mean something else. In the end, the one who cannot write must submit to the one who can and entrust him with the reply; a reply that, following the pattern of the previous letter, is subject to the same style of interpretation.

And if, moreover, the subject of the correspondence is a little delicate, and involves secret matters that should be indecipherable to a third person if the letter happens to go astray; and if, in this regard, there is also a deliberate intention not to say things clearly, then, no matter how brief the correspondence, the two parties will end up understanding each other as well as two medieval scholars might have, in the olden days, after debating the meaning of Aristotle's *entelechy* for four hours (I have shied away from using a more modern example to avoid getting my ears boxed!).

This is exactly what happened to our two correspondents. The first letter written for Renzo covered many subjects. It began with both the story of his escape (told more concisely, but also more chaotically, than the tale you've read) and a report on his current situation. Neither Agnese nor her dragoman could get a clear or complete idea of what he was talking about. Secret warnings, a new name, being safe but forced to hide: Such things were unfamiliar to them, and they were described cryptically in the letter. This section was followed by anxious, passionate questions about Lucia's situa-

tion, with obscure and pained allusions to the rumors that had reached him. The letter ended with uncertain and distant hopes, plans projected into the future, and, until such time, promises and prayers to keep their engagement, not to lose patience or courage, and to wait for better days.

Some time later, Agnese found a trusted means of getting a letter, together with fifty scudi provided by Lucia, into Renzo's hands. At the sight of so much gold, Renzo had no idea what to think. His mind troubled by dismay as well as an apprehension that left no room for contentment, he ran to his scribe to ask him to interpret the letter and find the key to this strange mystery.

In the letter, Agnese's scribe, after complaining about how unclear the previous message was, went on to describe, in an almost equally clear manner, what he called the tremendous story of that person. At this point, he explained the reason for the fifty scudi. Then, in a roundabout way, he came to the story of the vow, and added the more direct and explicit advice that Renzo set his heart at peace and think no more about it.

It was all Renzo could do to keep from taking out his frustration on the reader-interpreter: He shook with rage, horrified at what he could and could not understand. He had that terrible script read back to him three or four times, sometimes thinking he understood it better, sometimes finding that what had initially seemed clear had become more obscure. And in his passionate fervor, he wanted the scribe to immediately pick up his pen and reply. After the strongest imaginable expressions of pity and fear over Lucia's situation—"write!" he continued to dictate: "I have no intention of setting my heart at peace, and I never will. And that such advice should not be given to a boy like me; and that I won't touch the money; that I'll give it back, and I'll keep it in safekeeping, for the girl's dowry. But that the girl must be mine; that I don't know about any vows; and that I have always heard that the Madonna intercedes to help the troubled, to bestow grace, but I've never heard a word about her being spiteful and short of words; and that this cannot be; and that,

with this money, we have enough to set up house here; and that, if I'm in a bit of trouble now, it's just a storm that'll pass quickly"; and other things of this sort.

Agnese received the letter some time later and dictated back. And their exchange continued as I have described.

Lucia felt greatly relieved when her mother managed—who knows how—to convey that the boy was safe and had been informed of the vow. She wanted nothing more than for him to forget her or, to be more precise, for him to try to forget her. For her part, she made a similar resolution regarding him a hundred times a day, and she used every means to put it into effect. She kept busy and tried to bury herself in her work. Whenever Renzo's image appeared before her, she would say or sing a silent prayer. But that image, almost mischievously, did not tend to announce its appearance; it would sneak up behind other images, so that her mind wouldn't even realize it was there until some minutes had passed. Lucia's thoughts were often on her mother; how could they not be? But the imaginary Renzo gradually receded into third place, like the real Renzo had done so many times in the past. Every time her thoughts turned to the people, places, and memories of her past, his image squeezed in. And if the poor girl sometimes let herself fantasize about the future, he would appear there, too, if for no other reason than to say, "Anyway, I won't be there." So, while it was a hopeless endeavor not to think about him, her ability to think less intensely of him than her heart desired was constrained. She would have managed better if she alone had desired it, but Donna Prassede, for her part, was wholly devoted to expelling Renzo from Lucia's thoughts, and she had found no better expedient than to bring him up constantly. "Well?" she would say. "Have we stopped thinking of him?"

"I'm not thinking of anybody," Lucia would answer.

Such a reply was not satisfactory to Donna Prassede. She would counter that actions spoke louder than words. From there, she would expound on the behavior of young people. In her words, "Once they've got their heart set on a troublemaker (always their

inclination), they never let go. Give them an honest suitor, a gentleman, reasonable, settled, with whom, by some accident, things don't work out, and they're immediately resigned. But a ne'er-do-well? They'll never get over him." And then would begin the panegyric for the poor absent boy, the rascal who had gone to Milan to rob and murder. She wanted Lucia to confess the mischief he had supposedly gotten into in his own village.

Lucia, her voice trembling with all the shame, sadness, and indignation she could find in her kind soul and humble condition, swore up and down that, in her village, people had only ever had good things to say about the poor boy. She wished, she added, that someone from her village could be there to attest to the fact. She even defended his exploits in Milan—of which she was not well informed—precisely because of her knowledge of him and his behavior ever since childhood. She defended him and intended to keep defending him, because of her duties toward charity, her love of the truth, and—to say the word she herself used to explain her feelings—her love for her fellow man. But in these apologies, Donna Prassede found ammunition to convince Lucia that her heart was still lost to him. And to be honest, in moments like these, I myself couldn't tell you what the truth was. The ignoble portrait that the old woman painted of the poor boy reawakened in the girl's mind, more vividly and distinctly than before, the opposite image, which had been shaped by their long acquaintance; and the forcibly repressed memories came flooding back. The older woman's aversion and scorn reminded Lucia of her many former reasons for respect. Donna Prassede's blind, violent hatred only strengthened Lucia's compassion. With affections such as these, who knows how much there might or might not be of the sentiment hidden behind them, which is so easily introduced into minds. Imagine how it will affect those who are being forced to drive it away. Whatever the case may be, the discussion, on Lucia's part, could never continue for long, since the words quickly ended in tears.

If Donna Prassede had been driven to treat Lucia this way by some inveterate hatred of her, maybe those tears would have moved

her and made her stop. Since she was speaking with the best intentions, however, she forged ahead, undeterred; sobbing and pleading may restrain the weapons of an enemy, but not the scalpel of a surgeon. And then, having fulfilled her duty, she would pass from jabs and rebuffs to exhortations and advice, seasoned with words of praise to temper the bitter with the sweet and better achieve her purpose by working on the girl's mind from different angles. After these quarrels (which always had more or less the same beginning, middle, and end), the good-hearted Lucia, of course, felt no grudge toward the harsh preacher, who otherwise treated her with great kindness; even here, you could still see the woman's good intentions. But they left her with such reawakened and resurgent thoughts and affections that it required much time and effort to regain her former calm.

Luckily for her, Lucia was not the only target of Donna Prassede's beneficence, so these quarrels were infrequent. In addition to the rest of the servants, whose thoughts, to varying degrees, all required correction and guidance, in addition to all the other opportunities to lend these same services, out of the goodness of her heart, to the many toward whom she had no obligations—opportunities that she sought out if they did not volunteer themselves—she also had five daughters. None of them lived at home, but for all the worries they gave her, they might as well have. Three were nuns, and the other two were married. So of course Donna Prassede found herself with three convents and two households to supervise: a vast and complicated enterprise made even more arduous by the fact that the two husbands, with the backing of fathers, mothers, and siblings, and the three Mothers Superior, supported by other dignitaries and many nuns, refused to accept her oversight. It was war, or rather five separate wars: covert and courteous, to an extent, but still intense and without respite. On all five fronts, it took constant vigilance to evade her attentions, shut out her opinions, ignore her demands, and keep her in the dark about everything as much as possible. Not to mention the resistance and difficulties she encountered in managing the affairs of others with whom she had even less

business. For everyone knows that people usually don't know what's good for them and have to be forced to accept it. But her zeal did have free rein at home, where each person was subject, everywhere and in everything, to her authority. With the exception of Don Ferrante, for whom things proceeded in their own peculiar way.

A man of learning, he was one to neither command nor obey. So much the better that, in all household matters, her Ladyship should be the boss. But that did not make him a servant! And if, when asked, he occasionally lent her the service of his pen, it was because it struck his fancy. Otherwise, he knew how to say no when he wasn't convinced of what she wanted him to write. "Figure out a way," he would tell her in such cases. "Do it yourself, since it seems so clear to you." Donna Prassede, after years of trying, fruitlessly, to push him from doing nothing to doing something, had limited herself to frequent grumbling, calling him a lazybones, a man set in his ways, a man of letters—a title she invested with both irritation and satisfaction.

Don Ferrante spent long hours in his study, where he had a considerable collection of books—just under three hundred volumes: These were very select works, all the most reputable texts, on various subjects in which he could boast some knowledge. In astrology, he was regarded as more than a dilettante, and rightly so, because he had mastered not only the general notions and common vocabulary of influences, aspects, and conjunctions, but he also knew how to speak authoritatively, almost *ex cathedra,* of the twelve houses into which the heavens are divided, the great circles, the degrees of shadow and light, ascendants and descendants, transits and revolutions; in short, the most certain and recondite principles of the science. For about twenty years, he had supported Gerolamo Cardano's division of the zodiac into twelve houses, in long and frequent disputes with another scholar who was fiercely attached to the system of Alcabitius (out of sheer obstinacy, according to Don Ferrante). Although Don Ferrante readily acknowledged the superiority of the ancients, he could not abide any refusal to side with the moderns when they were clearly right. He also had a better

than average familiarity with the history of the science, and in a pinch, could quote the most famous predictions that had come true, and argue with subtlety and erudition about the ones that had not, to prove that the fault lay not with astrology, but with those who had not known how to apply it.

As for ancient philosophy, he had learned quite enough, and kept learning more, through his reading of Diogenes Laërtius. But no matter how nice the old systems are, one cannot adopt them all. If you wish to be a philosopher, you have to choose one, and Don Ferrante had chosen Aristotle, who, he used to say, was neither ancient nor modern. He was simply *the* philosopher. He also had various texts by the wisest and most sophisticated of Aristotle's followers among the moderns. He never wanted to read the works of Aristotle's critics (so as not to waste time, he said), or buy them (so as not to waste money). As an exception, however, he made room in his library for the celebrated twenty-two books of *De subtilitate* by Girolamo Cardano, and a few of his other anti-Aristotelian works, because of his primacy in astrology, saying that anyone who could write a treatise like *De restitutione temporum et motuum coelestium,* and a book like *Duodecim geniturarum,* deserved an audience, even when he was wrong; and that his biggest flaw was an excess of genius; and who knows what he could have achieved, also in philosophy, if he had only stuck to the right path. Otherwise, Don Ferrante passed for a consummate Aristotelian in the estimate of the learned, although he felt like he did not know enough, and said more than once, in all modesty, that the essence, the universals, the soul of the world, and the nature of things were not as clear as one might believe.

Natural philosophy was for him not so much a study as a hobby. On this subject, he had read rather than studied the works of Aristotle and Pliny; nevertheless, thanks to these readings, and the information he had gleaned incidentally from treatises on general philosophy, and by leafing through the *Magia naturalis* of Giovanni Battista della Porta, as well as the three histories of Cardano (*Lapidum, plantarum, animalium*), the treatise on herbs, plants, and animals

of Albertus Magnus, and other less important works, he could converse intelligently on the remarkable virtues and singular curiosities of many medicinal herbs; precisely describe the forms and habits of mermaids and the solitary phoenix; explain how the salamander can pass through fire without burning; how the remora, that tiny fish, has the strength and ability to bring to a halt even the largest ships on the high seas; how dewdrops turn into pearls inside an oyster shell; how the chameleon feeds on air; how crystal is formed from ice that has slowly hardened over the centuries; and other wondrous secrets of nature.

He had delved more deeply into magic and witchcraft since, according to our anonymous writer, these sciences were far more popular and necessary, and their effects were more important and easier to verify. Needless to say, Don Ferrante's only purpose in such a study was to learn the sinister arts of sorcery in depth, so he could guard and defend himself against them. And, with the support primarily of the great Martin Delrio (the master of that science), he was able to discourse expertly on love spells, sleeping spells, curses, and the infinite varieties of these three main types that, unfortunately—our anonymous author goes on to say—were still practiced in his day, and with such unfortunate effects.

Equally broad and solid was Don Ferrante's knowledge of history, especially universal history. His authors in this field were the most reputable, in fact: Tarcagnota, Dolce, Bugatti, Campana, and Guazzo.

But what is history, Don Ferrante would often ask, without politics? A guide who walks and walks and walks with no one following him to learn the way, is wasting his steps. Just as politics without history is a man walking without a guide. So on his bookshelves, there was a place reserved for the political writers, which featured prominently—among minor, and less famous volumes—the works of Bodin, Cavalcanti, Sansovino, Paruta, and Boccalini. But there were two books in this field that Don Ferrante placed over and above all the others. Two that, for a time, he used to call the best, without ever being able to decide which of the two was singularly

deserving of the title. The first, *Il principe* and *discorsi* by the celebrated Florentine Secretary: quite the scoundrel, Don Ferrante used to say, but profound. The second was the *Ragion di stato,* by the no less celebrated Giovanni Botero: a decent man, he used to say, but a sharp one. But shortly before the period within which our story takes place, a book appeared that put an end to the question of primacy, surpassing even the works of those two *matadors,* as Don Ferrante used to call them. A book that contained and identified all the tricks, for the sake of knowing them, and all the virtues, for the sake of practicing them. A tiny book, but pure gold. In a word, the *Statista regnante,* by Don Valeriano Castiglione, that most famous man whom the greatest scholars vied to praise, and for whose services the greatest personages competed. The same man, it is well known, upon whom Pope Urban VIII lavished the most extraordinary praise. The man whom Cardinal Borghese and the Viceroy of Naples, Don Pietro of Toledo, implored, respectively, to write about the deeds of Pope Paul V, and the wars of the Catholic King in Italy, both to no avail. The man whom King Louis XIII of France appointed as his historian, at the suggestion of Cardinal Richelieu, and upon whom Duke Charles Emmanuel of Savoy conferred the same honor. The man who was praised by Duchess Cristina, Christine, daughter of the most Christian King Henry IV, in a diploma that enumerated, along with his many other qualities, "The certain glory of the fame he has won in Italy as the foremost writer of our day."

But while Don Ferrante could say he was versed in all these sciences, there was one in which he deserved and enjoyed the title of master: the chivalric sciences. Not only could he argue about the subject with true mastery, but he was also frequently asked to intervene in matters of honor, and he never failed to render a verdict. In his library and, one could say, in his head, were the works of the most renowned writers in the field: Paride del Pozzo, Fausto da Longiano, Urrea, Muzio, Romei, Albergato, and the first and second *Forno* of Torquato Tasso, whose *Gerusalemme liberata* and the *Gerusalemme conquistata* he always had close at hand, and whose pas-

sages on chivalry he could quote from memory. But the supreme author, to his mind, was our own celebrated Francesco Birago, with whom he had, on more than one occasion, been called upon to judge a matter of honor; and a man who, for his part, spoke of Don Ferrante with particular esteem. From the moment that renowned gentleman's *Discorsi cavallereschi* appeared, Don Ferrante predicted, without hesitation, that this work would make Olevano's work obsolete, and remain, together with its other noble sisters, as the code of supreme authority for posterity; a prediction, according to our anonymous author, whose veracity we can all judge for ourselves.

He then moved on to some readings for pleasure, but I am starting to wonder whether the reader really wants to hear any more of this catalogue, and to fear that you may have begun to consider me a servile copyist, and as much of a bore as the anonymous writer, for having so naïvely followed Don Ferrante far afield of the main story, down this tangent in which he has been so long-winded probably only to boast of his learning and show that he wasn't behind the times. But what's written is written, and I'll have to keep it, so as not to waste my efforts, but I'll skip the remaining books so we can get back on the main road; especially since we have a long way to go before we will encounter any of our characters, and an even longer way still before we find the ones at the center of the events that most interest the reader, if indeed the reader finds anything interesting in all this.

Until autumn of the following year, 1629, everyone remained—some by choice, others by force—almost in the same condition in which we left them, without anything happening, nor anyone doing anything worth reporting. Autumn came, and although Agnese and Lucia had planned on getting together, a major public event scattered their plans to the wind—which was certainly one of the least of its effects. Other major events later followed that did not, however, lead to any notable change in the destinies of our characters.

But in the end, they would be swept up by new, more widespread, powerful, and extreme circumstances, affecting even the least of them, according to the scale of the world. Like a giant

whirlwind that pursues, wanders, splits, and uproots, ripping up roofs, stripping the stucco off bell towers, tearing down walls, and casting debris everywhere, even blowing away the twigs hidden in the grass, seeking out the dried rotting leaves in the corners where a breeze had borne them, and then carrying them around in the grips of its plunder.

Now, in order to better understand the private events that remain for me to relate, we must absolutely take a step back and pause for a rough account of the public events.

Chapter 28

After the Saint Martin's Day riots, times of plenty seemed to have miraculously returned to Milan: Bread piled high in every bakery; prices as low as they'd been in better years, for flour, too. The people who had taken to the streets on those two days to protest, or worse, had something to celebrate now (except for the few who had been arrested). And don't go thinking they settled down once the shock of the arrests had worn off. In every square, corner, and tavern, there was public jubilation, rounds of congratulations, and boastful whispers that they had figured out how to bring down the price of bread. Amid all the celebrations and bravado, however, there was (and how could there not be?) an apprehension, a foreboding, that the good times would not last. The bakers and flour sellers continued to be attacked, as they had been during the previous period of artificial abundance produced, temporarily, by Antonio Ferrer's first tariff. Everyone consumed without restraint. Anyone with some money set aside invested it in bread and flour, storing them in bins, small casks, and kettles. This competition to take advantage of the low prices made it not only impossible for the situation to last (which it was inherently), but harder to sustain for even a short time. And then, on the fifteenth of November, Ferrer, *De orden de Su Excelencia,* issued a decree that anyone who had grain or flour at home was prohibited from buying any more, and everyone was prohibited from buying more than a two-day supply of bread, *on pain of pecuniary or bodily punishment, at the discretion of His Excellency.* Every official and every individual was commanded to report

transgressors. Judges were ordered to search specific houses. At the same time, bakers received a new order to keep their shops well stocked with bread, *on pain, in the event of failure, of five years or more on the galleys, at the discretion of H.E.* To imagine that any such decree could be executed would take quite an imagination indeed. And if every decree issued in those days had been executed, the Duchy of Milan would have had to send as many men out to sea as the British fleet does today.

Be that as it may, if the bakers were to obey these orders and bake that much bread, they needed a sufficient supply of ingredients. There were thoughts (since during a famine there are always renewed attempts to make bread from products normally consumed in another form), there were thoughts, I was saying, of adding rice to the ingredients for multigrain bread. So on the twenty-third of November, the Commissioner and Tribunal of Provision issued a decree to confiscate half of all rough rice (*risone*, as they used to call it, and still do) in everyone's possession. The penalty for having it without the permission of the gentlemen of the Tribunal was forfeiture of the rice and a fine of three scudi per bushel. The most honest of decrees, as everyone can see.

But this rice had to be paid for, and at a price vastly disproportionate to the cost of bread. The task of making up for the huge gap was imposed on the city, but the Council of the Decurioni, which had assumed responsibility for the city, resolved on that same day to communicate to the Governor that this policy was not sustainable. In his decree of the seventh of December, the Governor set the price of rice at twelve liras per bushel; anyone who sold it at a higher rate, or refused to sell, was threatened with confiscation of the rice and a fine equivalent to its value, *and greater pecuniary and bodily punishment, including the galleys, at the discretion of H.E, in accordance with the quality of the cases and the persons.*

The price of white rice had already been set prior to the uprising. And the rate, or—to use the most celebrated term in modern annals—the *maximum* of wheat and other more ordinary grains, was

probably established by other decrees that I have not had the opportunity to see.*

As a result of the price of bread and flour being kept so low in Milan, a parade of people rushed in from the countryside to buy it. To remedy what Don Gonzalo called this "inconvenience," he prohibited, by another decree on the fifteenth of December, the exportation of bread worth more than twenty soldi from the city, on pain of forfeiture of the bread and a twenty-five scudi fine, *and, in the event of inability to pay, two jerks of the strappado in public, and an even greater punishment,* as always, *at the discretion of H.E.* On the twenty-second of the same month (it is unclear why so late), he issued a similar order for flour and grain.

The masses had wanted to bring back the days of plenty through looting and arson. The government wanted to maintain them through the galleys and the strappado. These methods were complementary, but did they help achieve the goal? The reader will see in a moment. After all, it's easy to see and worthwhile to observe the logical connection between these strange measures. Each was the inevitable consequence of its predecessor, and all of them stemmed from the initial decision to set the price of bread far below its real price: that is to say, rather than leave things to the natural law of supply and demand.

To the masses, such an expedient has always appeared, and could only ever appear, to be as fair as it is easy to execute. So it is only natural that, amid the suffering and hardship of the famine, they would want, implore, and, if possible, impose set prices. But as the consequences of the decrees began to be felt, the authorities had to remedy each one, with a law that prohibited people from doing exactly what the previous law had encouraged.

Allow me to observe in passing a singular coincidence. In a

* The Law of the General Maximum (*Loi du maximum général*) was adopted during the French Revolution, in 1793, to control the price of bread and punish price gouging.

country and period closer to our own, during the most clamorous and remarkable period in modern history, recourse was made in similar circumstances to similar expedients (substantially the same, you might say—varying only by degree—and in almost the same order), despite it being a different era, with a growth of learning in Europe, and especially in that country. This was mainly because the mob, which had not received the benefit of that learning, was able to impose its judgment for so long and *forcer la main,* force the hand—as they say in that country—of the lawmakers.

Getting back to our story, in the end, the two main effects of the uprising were the immediate loss and destruction of food, and widespread, reckless, and excessive food consumption for as long as the low prices held, at the expense of the small amount of grain that was supposed to last until the new harvest. In addition to these general effects, let us not forget the four poor devils who were hanged as leaders of the riot: two in front of the Forno delle Grucce, two at one end of the street of the Commissioner of Provision.

The historical accounts from those days were written so haphazard that I have been unable to find out how and when the brutal rates were ended. If, given the lack of concrete facts, I may venture a guess, I'd be inclined to believe that they were abolished shortly before or after the twenty-fourth of December, the day of the executions. As for the decrees, after the last one I mentioned, on the twenty-second of the same month, I have found none that deal with the food supply. Maybe the documents were destroyed or eluded my research, or maybe in the end the government, discouraged if not chastened by the ineffectiveness of its remedies, and overwhelmed by events, abandoned them to their fate. What I have found in the accounts of more than one historian (inclined, as they were, to describe great events rather than to identify their causes and development) is a portrait of the country, and mainly of the city, in the late winter and spring, when the cause of the ills—the imbalance between the supply of food and the demand for it—was aggravated rather than eliminated by remedies that temporarily suspended its effects. Little was to be gained even by sufficient im-

ports of foreign wheat. Such a measure was obstructed by the lack of public and private funds, food shortages in the surrounding villages, the scarcity, slowness, and restrictions of commerce, and the laws themselves, which tended to create low prices and keep them low, when, as I said before, the true cause of the famine, or rather the famine itself, continued unchecked and in full force. Here is my copy of that heartbreaking portrait.

Stores were boarded up as far as the eye could see; workshops were mostly abandoned; and the streets were an appalling spectacle, an endless parade of misery, a perpetual abode of suffering. The beggars by trade were now the minority, lost and confused among the multitude of new arrivals, and reduced to competing for charity with people from whom they might have once received it: shop boys and apprentices who, dismissed by workshop owners, had lost their daily wages, and scraped by on their reserves and capital; the owners themselves, who had been bankrupted and ruined by the shutdown of business; and workers and master craftsmen of every trade and art, from the most ordinary to the most refined, the most basic to the most luxurious. They wandered from door to door, street to street, leaning against corner walls, crouching on the sidewalks in front of houses and churches, begging piteously for charity, or wavering between need and a still ungoverned shame, emaciated, weary, shivering from the cold and hunger in ragged, threadbare clothing that still bore the signs, in many, of the comfortable life they used to lead, while their apathy and despair offered vague clues of earlier habits of honest hard work.

Servants formed no small part of the pitiable horde, dismissed by masters who had themselves fallen on hard times, or who, despite their wealth, were unable, in such a year, to maintain the customary luxury of a household staff. And attached to these various indigents were a number of others who were used to living, in part, on their earnings: children, women, and the elderly, clinging to their former supporters or begging in other areas of the city.

Easily distinguished by their matted forelocks and tattered splendor, as well as something in their attitude, their behavior, and

the marks imprinted on a face by the habits of a lifetime (the stranger the life, the sharper and clearer the marks), were many bravi who, having lost the bread of their criminal livelihood due to the common condition, were reduced to begging for the bread of charity. Subdued by hunger, competing for charity with their former victims, they shuffled, frightened and dazed, down streets they had long ruled with heads held high, and fierce and threatening looks, wearing rich, gaudy livery, long feathers in their caps, armed with expensive weapons, dressed sharply, and perfumed. Now they humbly extended the same hand for charity that they had once raised brazenly, to threaten, or treacherously, to wound.

Perhaps the most appalling, and at the same time, most heartbreaking sight was that of the peasants: individuals, couples, entire families—husbands and wives carrying babies in their arms or bound to their backs, holding children by the hand, and trailed by their elderly. Some had seen their houses broken into and looted by soldiers (billeted or passing through) and fled in desperation. To arouse more sympathy, and as a badge of their misery, some of them exhibited the bruises and scars from beatings received while defending their last few supplies or escaping a blind and brutal violence. Others were spared that particular scourge but had been driven from their homes by two afflictions from which no corner was immune—barren land and heavy taxation (more exorbitant than ever to satisfy the so-called wartime needs)—and had come to the city, and continued to come, as if expecting the ancient seat to be a last refuge of wealth and pious munificence. The newly arrived could be identified not so much by their uncertain gait and air of freshness as by their dismay and irritation at finding such total competition for their misery, in a place where they had thought they would be singular objects of compassion and thus attract attention and relief. Their rivals, who had been wandering and living on the city streets for longer, surviving on help they obtained or received seemingly at random amid the vast imbalance between supply and demand, had a more grim and weary consternation etched on their faces and gestures. Their clothing was different (on

those who could still be considered clothed), as was their appearance: pale faces from the lowland, tanned ones from the higher plains and the hills, ruddy ones from the mountains. But they were all gaunt and distraught, with sunken eyes, blank stares that were glowering or numb, matted hair, and long unkempt beards. Bodies that hard work had developed and toughened were now worn down by poverty. Through their tattered clothes you could see wrinkled skin on bony arms and emaciated shins and chests. And different, but no less painful, than the sight of this defeated vigor, was the sight of the weakest, women and children, succumbing more quickly to languor and exhaustion.

Here and there along the streets were piles of straw leaning against the houses, trampled and mixed with foul trash. But this filth was both a gift and an example of charity. For these were beds lent to some of the poor wretches on which to lay their heads at night. Every now and then—even during the day—you could see one of them lying down or stretching out, strength sapped and legs buckling from hunger and exhaustion. Sometimes the grim bed held a dead body. Sometimes a person would suddenly collapse, like a rag, and fall to the cobblestones, lifeless.

You might also see the occasional neighbor or passerby leaning over certain of these beds, moved by a sudden pang of compassion. In some places, there were signs of a more orderly and lasting relief, delivered by a wealthy hand that was used to doing good on a large scale: This was the hand of the good Federigo. He had selected six priests in whom deep and tireless charity was accompanied and served by a robust constitution. He divided them into pairs, each of which was assigned to patrol a third of the city, followed by porters carrying various foods, subtler and more rapid restoratives, and clothing. Every morning, the three pairs would set out for different neighborhoods, go up to the people lying abandoned on the ground, and minister to each according to his or her need. Those who were already at death's door and no longer able to ingest food would be given the last rites and the consolations of religion. Soup, eggs, bread, and wine were dispensed to the hungry.

Others, exhausted by a more prolonged hunger, were offered broth, a restorative tonic, and stronger wine, after first being revived, if necessary, by spirits. At the same time, they distributed clothing to those more indecently and woefully exposed.

Nor did their assistance end there. The good shepherd wanted, at least wherever possible, to provide more effective and lasting relief. The poor who, thanks to that first restorative, found the strength to get back on their feet and walk, were given a little money so that the recurrence of need and the lack of other support would not cause a swift relapse to their former plight. For others, room and board were sought in a nearby house. At the homes of the well-to-do, they were usually welcomed out of charity, as the Cardinal had recommended. At the homes of others, whose means fell short of their goodwill, the priests asked that the poor soul be given room and board; they set a price, and immediately paid a deposit. They would then notify the local parish priests, so that they might visit the indigent, in addition to going back themselves.

Needless to say, Federigo did not limit his cares to the most extreme cases, nor did he wait for them to be reached before taking action. So ardent and varied was his charity that it heeded every call and responded to every need, rushing in to aid suffering it had not foreseen, and taking as many forms, so to speak, as the variety of needs. In fact, by gathering all of his resources, saving even more rigorously, drawing on reserves meant for other types of largesse that were now secondary, he looked for every possible way to raise money and used all of it to feed the hungry. He made large purchases of grain and sent much of it to the parts of the diocese with the greatest shortages. And since the food relief fell far short of the need, he also sent salt, which—according to Ripamonti (*Historiae patriae,* decadis V, book VI, 386)—"converted the grass of the fields and the bark of the trees into food." He also distributed wheat and money to the parishes of the city, which he himself visited, neighborhood by neighborhood, to distribute charity. He helped many poor families anonymously. At the Archbishop's palace, as attested by a contemporary writer, the physician Alessandro Tadino (in the

Raguaglio we will often have occasion to cite below), two thousand bowls of rice soup were distributed every morning.*

But even these acts of charity—which we can certainly call heroic, since they came from only one man and from only his resources (Federigo declined, as a rule, to administer the generosity of others)—together with the generosity of other private hands, who though not so rich, were still quite numerous, and the subsidies decreed by the Council of the Decurioni, and distributed by the Tribunal of Provision, still fell far short of the need. While some people from the mountains, on the verge of starvation, had their lives prolonged by the Cardinal's charity, others reached that extreme anyway, while still others relapsed once that measured ration was depleted. Other areas that charity deemed less afflicted found their aid not forgotten, but rather postponed, until the affliction became fatal. Death was everywhere, and people flocked to the city from every part, where a couple thousand of the hungry—the healthiest and the most experienced at elbowing their way through a crowd—would acquire a soup, enough to stave off death for another day. But thousands more were left behind, envying those whom we might call the lucky ones, although the left behind often included their wives, children, and parents. And while in some parts of the city, the most forlorn and abject were picked up off the ground, revived, cared and temporarily provided for, in a hundred other parts they collapsed, languished, and even died without help or comfort.

All day long, you could hear the muddled droning of voices begging on the streets. All night, a murmur of groans, broken occasionally by sudden loud laments, howling, and solemn invocations that ended in piercing screams.

Amid such dire straits, with so many different grievances, there

* Alessandro Tadino (1580–1661), chief medical officer [*protomedico*] during the plague, was the author of *Raguaglio dell'origine et giornali successi della grande peste contagiosa venefica et malefica seguita nella città di Milano e suo ducato dall'anno 1629 fino all'anno 1632* (Milano: E. Ghisolfi, 1648), 10.

was remarkably no attempt at nor even a call for an uprising; at least there is no record of one. And yet, among those living and dying in that manner, there were many who had not attended the school of resignation. There were hundreds of the very same men who, on Saint Martin's Day, had made their voices heard. Nor should we think that all had been restrained by the example of those four poor wretches who had paid the price for everyone. For what effect could the mere memory of that torture have on the multitude of refugees, knowing that they, too, had been sentenced to a slow torture which they were already undergoing? But this is how we men are made: Indignant and furious, we rebel against moderate ills, but bow in silence before the extremes. We bear the worst of what we once considered unbearable, stupefied but not resigned.

The constant decline in population of that pitiable throng were replenished many times over every day. People kept pouring into the city, first from the neighboring villages, then from the wider countryside, then from the other cities in the state, and finally even from cities outside the state. And in the meantime, the longtime inhabitants of Milan were leaving every day, some to avoid the sight of so much affliction, others, seeing themselves replaced, as it were, by new competitors in begging, left in a last desperate attempt to find help anywhere—anywhere it might exist, anywhere they would not have to vie with such a massive and insistent crowd. As they left, they ran into pilgrims coming from the opposite direction, a sight repulsive to both sides, and a grim sample, a sinister omen, of the destination toward which each was headed. But each continued on their way, if no longer with the hope of changing their fate, then at least so as not to return beneath a sky turned hateful, and to never again see the places where they had lost all hope. Except that some, their forces failing them altogether, collapsed in the road, lifeless, where their bodies remained: an even more woeful sight to their fellows in misery, an object of horror, and perhaps a reproach to the other travelers. "I myself saw," wrote Ripamonti, "on the road that circles the walls, the body of a woman . . . half-

chewed grass sticking out of her mouth, and her lips frozen in a wrathful, convulsive effort . . . she had a bundle on her back, and swathed in the rags around her breast was an infant, wailing for the pap . . . some good souls arrived who, picking the poor creature up off the ground, took it away, thus fulfilling the first duties of a mother."

That contrast between splendor and rags, excess and misery—an ordinary sight in ordinary times—had by then ceased entirely. Rags and misery were almost everywhere, and what could be distinguished was the bare semblance of frugal sobriety. The nobility could be seen walking in clothing that was plain and modest, or even threadbare and cheap. Some, because the common causes of the misery had so reduced their fortunes or given the final blow to already shaky patrimonies; others, because they feared that ostentation would provoke public desperation, or were embarrassed to insult the public calamity. The hated but respected tyrants, who used to go about with an entourage of bravi, now traveled alone for the most part, with their heads lowered and faces that seemed to both offer and plead for peace. Others, who in times of prosperity had already been of a more humane disposition and more modest bearing, now seemed confused, dismayed, and almost overwhelmed by the constant sight of a misery that surpassed not only the possibility of relief but I would almost say the limits of compassion. Those with the means to offer charity had to make a grim choice between hunger and hunger, urgency and urgency. And no sooner was a sympathetic hand seen extended toward the hand of some unfortunate, then other unfortunates would enter into the fray. Those with the most remaining strength pushed their way to the front to beg more insistently. The exhausted, the elderly, and the children raised their bony hands. Mothers lifted and displayed from afar their crying infants, swaddled in rags, and doubled over in their hands from hunger.

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And so the winter and spring passed. For months, the Tribunal of Health had been warning the Tribunal of Provision of the danger

of contagion looming over the city because of the misery growing in every part of it. It proposed that the vagrants be housed in various shelters. As this proposal was being discussed, as it was being approved, as consideration was being given to the means, methods, and places to enact it, more and more bodies piled up on the streets every day, and, in direct proportion, so did misery. At the Tribunal of Provision, another proposal was made—considered the easiest and most expeditious—to gather all the vagrants, healthy and sick alike, in a single place, the lazaretto, where they would be fed and cared for at public expense. And so it was decided, against the recommendations of the health authorities, who argued that such a large gathering would increase the very dangers being guarded against.

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The lazaretto of Milan (if this story should, by chance, fall into the hands of someone who has neither seen nor heard of it) is a four-sided, almost square enclosure, outside the city, to the left of the Porta Orientale, separated from the city walls by a moat, the road circling the walls, and a ditch that surrounds the enclosure itself.* The two longer sides measure about five hundred yards; the other two are maybe fifteen yards shorter; all four are subdivided into small one-story rooms on the outermost side. On the inside, a vaulted portico, supported by small slender columns, runs along three of the walls.

There were two hundred and eighty-eight rooms, more or less. In our own time, a large opening made in the middle, and a smaller one in a corner of the side wall facing the main road, removed a number of them, I don't know how many. At the time of our story, there were only two entrances: one in the middle of the side fac-

* The name lazaretto (*lazzaretto,* in Italian), is derived from the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (not to be confused with Lazarus of Bethany, whom Jesus raised from the dead), a beggar covered with sores (Luke 16:20), and the patron saint of lepers.

ing the city walls, and the other on the opposite side. In the center of the enclosure there was, and still is, a small octagonal church.

The original purpose of the complex, begun in the year 1489 with money from a private bequest and continued later with funds from both the government and other testators and donors, was, as the name implied, to shelter, when necessary, victims of the plague. The plague had already broken out on an average of two, four, six, or eight times in a century—long before this period and for a long time after—striking first one, then another European country, sometimes impacting a large part of it or even sweeping throughout the entire territory. At the time of which we are speaking, the lazaretto was being used only to store merchandise subject to quarantine.

Now, to empty it, the authorities dispensed with strict adherence to health regulations. After the prescribed disinfections and inspections had been completed, quickly quickly, all the merchandise was released in a single go. Straw was put down in all the rooms, and food supplies were provisioned in the available quality and quantity. Then by public decree, all vagrants were invited to report there for shelter.

Many came in willingly; all those who were lying sick in the streets and public piazzas were transported there. In a few days, between one group and the other, more than three thousand people were housed, but far more were left outside. Maybe each of them was hoping to be one of the few left to enjoy the city's charity. Maybe it was a natural aversion to being confined. Or the poor's distrust of anything proposed by the rich and powerful (a distrust that is always proportionate to the mutual ignorance between those who feel it and those who inspire it, to the number of the poor, and to the inanity of the laws). Or maybe they knew what was actually being offered. Or maybe it was all of these things combined, or some other reason. The fact remains that most of them, ignoring the decree, continued to shuffle down the streets, barely lifting their feet. Therefore, it was thought best to shift from invitation to coercion. The police went on patrols to force the vagrants into

the lazaretto. Anyone who resisted was taken there in restraints. For each person brought in, the police received a bounty of ten soldi, which goes to show how, even in times of great scarcity, there is always room for the misuse of public money. And although the assumption—indeed the express intention of the Tribunal of Provision—had been to evict a certain number of vagrants from the city and let them live and die in freedom elsewhere, they were now pursued so relentlessly that, in no time at all, the lazaretto's population, between guests and prisoners, was approaching ten thousand.

Women and children were presumably lodged in separate quarters, but the contemporary memoirs don't specify. There must have been no lack of rules and regulations to maintain order, but I'm sure you can all imagine the type of order that could be established and maintained in times like those and especially in circumstances like those, with such a vast and varied assembly, in which the unwilling were tossed in with the willing; the professional beggars with those for whom begging was a shameful, humiliating necessity; the many schooled in sloth, cheating, scorn, and violence in the squares, taverns, and palaces of tyrants with the many others raised to do the honest labor of the fields and the workshops.

How the lot of them shared food and lodgings would be hard to imagine did we not have reliable information, but we do. They slept piled on top of one another, twenty or thirty to a cell, or lying beneath the porticos on smatterings of putrid, fetid straw or the bare ground; for although instructions had been given for a sufficient supply of fresh straw, to be frequently changed, the truth is that there was not enough, it was rotten, and it was never changed. Instructions had also been given for the bread to be of good quality; now, what administrator would ever admit to the preparation and distribution of bad food? But how could something unavailable under normal circumstances, even for limited service, be obtained in this case, and for that multitude? At the time, it was said, as we see in the memoirs, that the bread in the lazaretto had been adulterated with heavy and non-nutritious ingredients. There was even a shortage of water, by which I mean fresh and healthy water. The

community well must have been the ditch surrounding the walls, which was shallow, slow-moving, and sometimes muddy, made worse by the use and vicinity of such a large and varied multitude.

In addition to these aggressive causes of mortality, which attacked bodies that were sick or feeling poorly, the season was extremely perverse: persistent rains, followed by an even more persistent drought, bringing with it an early and violent heat wave. In addition to sickness, there was the sickly feeling: the boredom and the mania of captivity, the memory of former habits, the grief over the dearly departed, the concern over the dearly absent, the torment and disgust toward one another, and so many other explosions of depression and rage, either brought in or born there; not to mention the fear and constant sight of death, which so many causes has made common, and which itself became a new and potent cause.

No one should be surprised by the spike and predominance of the death rate in that enclosure, which took on the appearance and, for many, the name of plague. Whether the combination and increase of all these causes served only to increase the activity of a simple influenza epidemic; whether (as seems to happen in even less severe and prolonged famines) it was a certain type of contagion that found fertile soil, so to speak, in bodies predisposed and prepared by hardship and malnutrition, bad weather, filth, exhaustion, and depression: that found, in short, the right season and the necessary conditions to be born, nourished, and multiply (if a layman may be allowed to use these words, based on the hypothesis proposed by several scientists and recently reproposed, with many arguments and much reserve, by a man as diligent as he was ingenious).* Perhaps the contagion first broke out in the lazaretto, as the physicians of the Tribunal of Health seem to have believed, according to an obscure and inexact report; perhaps it had already been alive and festering before (the most likely possibility, consid-

* *Del morbo petecchiale . . . e degli altri contagi in generale,* by Dr. F. Enrico Acerbi, chapter III, paras. 1 and 2.

ering how advanced and widespread the hardship was, and how high the death rate), and, once introduced into that throng of inmates, spread with a new and terrifying rapidity. Regardless of which hypothesis is true, the daily death toll in the lazaretto quickly surpassed one hundred.

While in that place all was languor, anguish, fear, sorrow, and trembling, at the Tribunal of Provision all was shame, shock, and uncertainty. There were debates and consultations with the Tribunal of Health, but the only conclusion reached was to undo everything that had been done with so much fanfare, and at great expense and vexation. The lazaretto was opened; all the paupers with any strength left were released, and they fled with a furious joy. Once again, the city echoed with its former laments, though now more feeble and wavering; again, it saw a smaller and more pitiable throng, writes Ripamonti, when he thought of how the crowd had thinned. The sick were transported to Santa Maria della Stella, which in those days was a shelter for the poor, where most of them died.

In the meantime, however, the blessed fields started to turn golden. The vagrants who had arrived from the countryside left the city, each headed toward his or her hometown, to the long-awaited harvest. The good Federigo bade farewell with a final effort and a new example of charity: Each peasant who appeared at the Archbishop's palace was given one *giulio* and a scythe for reaping the crops.*

With the harvest, the famine finally came to an end. The death rate, whether caused by an epidemic or a contagion, went down by the day, but still persisted until the fall, and was about to end when suddenly a new scourge broke out.

Many important events—of the kind given the special title of history—had taken place in the meantime. Cardinal Richelieu—after taking La Rochelle and patching together an agreement with

* The *giulio* was a silver coin, named after Pope Julius II, worth fifty-six cents in the currency of the era.

the King of England—had, through the power of his words, proposed to and persuaded the Royal Council of the need for prompt support for the Duke of Nevers. At the same time, he convinced the King to lead the expedition in person. While the preparations were being made, the Count of Nassau, Imperial Commissioner, ordered the new Duke in Mantua to hand over the states to Emperor Ferdinand; if not, the Emperor would send an occupying army. The Duke, who in more desperate circumstances had managed to hold off accepting such a harsh and suspect condition, was now encouraged by the approaching support of France. So he held off a little longer, couching his "No" in language as convoluted and verbose as possible, and proposing terms of surrender that were more ostentatious but less costly. The Commissioner left, declaring that they would settle the matter through force.

In March, Cardinal Richelieu descended into Italy with the French King at the head of an army. He had requested passage from the Duke of Savoy. There were talks: inconclusive. After a skirmish, won by the French, talks were renewed. A settlement was reached whereby the Duke, among other things, agreed that Don Gonzalo would lift the siege of Casale; if he refused, the Duke of Savoy would join with the French in an invasion of the state of Milan. Don Gonzalo, thinking he had gotten off easy, lifted the siege of Casale, which a French battalion immediately entered to reinforce the garrison.

It was on this occasion that Achillini addressed his famous sonnet to King Louis:

"Sweat, oh ye Fires, in forging metal!"*

He wrote another poem urging the King to embark immediately on the liberation of the Holy Land. But destiny decrees that the opinions of poets shall not be heeded; and if you ever find historical

* Claudio Achillini (1574–1640) was an Italian polymath and Baroque poet who wrote the sonnet "Sudate o fuochi, a preparar metalli," dedicated to Louis XIII, in celebration of the French conquest of Casale. The second poem to which he alludes, "*I tuoi colpi devoti, al fin troncaro,*" urges the French king to free the Holy Land.

events that suggest otherwise, be honest and admit that you had predetermined them. Cardinal Richelieu had decided, instead, to return to France, where he believed more urgent business awaited him. Girolamo Soranzo, the Venetian envoy, gave, in vain, a host of reasons why that was the wrong decision. But the King and the Cardinal paid as little heed to his prose as they had to Achillini's poetry, and withdrew most of the army, leaving only six thousand men in Susa to keep the pass open and enforce the treaty.

While that army was marching in one direction, the army of Ferdinand was marching from the other. It invaded the Grisons and the Valtellina and was preparing to descend into Milanese territory. Apart from all the damage to be feared from the army's passage, dispatches had been sent to the Tribunal of Health, warning that the army harbored the plague, elements of which the German troops always carried in those days, as Benedetto Varchi* mentions in describing the pestilence they had brought to Florence a century earlier.

Alessandro Tadino, one of the commissioners on the Tribunal of Health (there were six, in addition to the president: four magistrates and two physicians), was—as he relates in the *Ragguaglio* (p. 16) that I have already mentioned—assigned to represent to the Governor the terrible danger looming over the territory if that army were to pass through on its way to besiege Mantua, as was rumored.

From Don Gonzalo's overall behavior, he seems to have been obsessed with gaining a place in history, which would not, in fact, ignore him. But (as often occurs), history either did not know or bother to record his most memorable contribution: his response to Tadino on that occasion. He replied that he didn't know what should be done; that the army had been set into motion by questions of interests and glory which outweighed the danger that it

* Benedetto Varchi (1503–65) was a historian whose *Storie fiorentine,* not published until 1721, includes a report on the 1531 plague in Florence, after the Imperial troops had assaulted the city.

posed; all things considered, they should take the best precautions they could, and place their trust in Providence.

In order to take the best precautions possible, the two physicians on the tribunal (the aforementioned Tadino and Senatore Settala, son of the celebrated Lodovico) proposed a ban, with harsh penalties, on the purchase of items of any sort from the soldiers passing through. But it was impossible to make the president of the tribunal understand the need for such an order. "He was a good-hearted man," wrote Tadino, "who could not believe that so many thousands of people would meet their deaths through commerce with these people and their goods." I cite this as one of the most remarkable passages of that time. As long as there have been commissions of health, there has never been a president who has made a similar argument, if indeed we can call it an argument.

Shortly after uttering that reply, Don Gonzalo left Milan. His departure was as dismal as its cause. He was removed because of the failure of the war he had championed and led. The people blamed him for the famine they had suffered under his administration. (No one either knew or was bothered by his response to the plague—as we shall see—except the Tribunal of Health, especially the two physicians.) As he left the governor's palace in a traveling coach, guarded by halberdiers on either side, with two mounted trumpeters in front, and other coaches carrying nobles behind, he was greeted by the loud jeering of children who had gathered in Piazza del Duomo and chased after him pell-mell.

The moment the procession entered the road leading to Porta Ticinese, by which they were supposed to leave, it was surrounded by a mob of people, some of whom had been waiting while others came running. Especially since the trumpeters, creatures of protocol, did not stop playing their horns all the way from the palace to the gates of the city. When an investigation into this riot was later held, one of the men, in response to criticism that his trumpeting had made the situation worse, said, "My dear sir, this is our profession. And if His Excellency had preferred that we not play, he

should have given us orders to be silent." But Don Gonzalo, either from reluctance to do something that might show fear, or fear of doing something that might inflame the mob, or because he was simply stunned, gave no such order. While the guards struggled in vain to hold them back, the mob surrounded the carriage on all sides, shouting, "Down with the famine, down with bleeding the poor," and worse. As the carriage approached the gate, they started to pelt it with rocks, bricks, and garbage of all kinds: the usual ammunition in such a skirmish. Some scrambled up the walls, from which they launched a final volley at the carriages as they left. And immediately after, they disbanded.

The Marquis Ambrogio Spinola, a man whose name had already acquired, in the wars in Flanders, the military renown it still enjoys today, was sent to replace Don Gonzalo.

In the meantime, the German army, under the supreme command of Count Rambaldo di Collalto—another Italian *condottiere* of lesser but not insignificant fame—had received the final order to proceed with the siege of Mantua, and in the month of September, it entered the state of Milan.

Armies, in those days, still consisted, for the most part, of soldiers of fortune enlisted by a professional condottiere, who had been commissioned by one prince or another, and sometimes on his own account, to sell the services of himself and his men. The men were attracted to that profession not so much by the pay as by the hope of looting and all the other enticements afforded by such license. Regular, overall discipline, there was none. Nor would it have concorded very well with the largely independent authority of the various condottieri. They were not particularly fussy about such matters. Even if they had wanted to, it is hard to see how they could have established and maintained discipline, since soldiers of that species would either mutiny against an innovative commander who got it into his head to abolish looting, or at least desert him, leaving him to guard his standard by himself. Moreover, since the princes who hired these so-called bands were more concerned with mustering large numbers, to ensure military success, than in having

a militia proportionate to their usually very limited ability to pay, the soldiers were generally paid late, on credit, and piecemeal. So the spoils of the places that had fallen became a kind of tacitly accepted supplement. Almost as famous as Wallenstein himself is his dictum: It is easier to maintain an army of one hundred thousand men than one of twelve thousand. And the army of which we are speaking consisted largely of men under his command who had laid waste to Germany in the course of the war so celebrated for itself and for its effects, later known, for its duration, as the Thirty Years' War, which was then in its eleventh year. There was also Wallenstein's own regiment, led by one of his lieutenants. Most of the other condottieri had served under his command, including more than one who, four years later, would contribute to his meeting the sorry end that everyone knows.*

The infantry numbered twenty-eight thousand, and the cavalry seven thousand. Descending from the Valtellina to reach the area of Mantua, they had to follow the full length of the Adda, past two branches of the lake, and then when it became a river again, until it emptied into the Po, which still left them with a good stretch to cover. In all, they spent eight days in the Duchy of Milan.

Most of the residents had taken refuge in the mountains, carrying their most valuable possessions, and driving their livestock before them. Others stayed behind, so as not to abandon someone sick, or to save the house from fire, or to keep an eye on their valuables, hidden or buried. Others because they had nothing to lose or were counting on gaining something. When the first contingent reached the village selected as a stopping place, it immediately spread out into the village and the surrounding areas and proceeded to sack them. Anything that could be used or taken disappeared. All the rest was destroyed or ruined: Furniture was turned into firewood, houses into stables. Not to mention the beatings, injuries, and rapes. Every ruse, every trick to save things proved use-

* Albrecht von Wallenstein was assassinated in 1634 by members of his own army, by order of Emperor Ferdinand.

less, for the most part, and sometimes led to greater damage. The soldiers were much more experienced in the stratagems of this aspect of the campaign, and they dug through every nook and cranny, tore down and demolished walls. They easily recognized the loose soil in the garden and went up into the mountains to steal the livestock. They entered the caves, guided by some local scoundrel, in search of any rich man who might be hiding, dragged him to his house and, by torturing him with threats and beatings, forced him to tell them where his treasure was hidden.

Finally, they would start to leave, and be gone. In the distance, you could hear the sound of the trumpet and drums dying down, followed by hours of terrified silence. And then, an accursed new beating of drums, a new blaring of trumpets, would announce the arrival of another contingent. Finding nothing more to plunder, the newcomers laid waste to whatever remained with even greater fury, burning the empty casks and doorways to rooms where nothing was left, then setting fire to houses themselves. And with even greater rage, of course, they mistreated the people, and so from bad to worse, for twenty days, as many days as there were contingents in the army.

Colico was the first town in the Duchy invaded by those demons. Then they raided Bellano. From there they entered and spread out into the Valsassina, which poured them into the territory of Lecco.

Chapter 29

Here, among the poor terrified people, we find a few individuals of our acquaintance.

News of the army's descent, approach, and actions spread like wildfire, and anyone who didn't see Don Abbondio during that period doesn't know the meaning of terror and distress. "They're coming: thirty, forty, fifty thousand. They're devils, heretics, antichrists. They sacked Cortenuova, set fire to Primaluna, and are now laying waste to Introibo, Pasturo, and Barzio. They've reached Ballabio. Tomorrow they'll be here!"

These were the rumors passing from mouth to mouth. The people scurried about, stopping one another in agitated consultation, debating whether to flee or stay. Women huddled together, tearing at their hair. But Don Abbondio—more determined to flee than anyone else, and to beat the crowd, as well—saw insurmountable obstacles and terrifying dangers on every road and at every possible refuge. "What can we do?" he exclaimed. "Where can we go?" The mountains, apart from the arduous hike, were not safe: Everyone knew that the Landsknechts would clamber up them like cats if they had any inkling or hope of plunder. And the lake was rough, with a high wind blowing. Not to mention that most of the boatmen had taken refuge with their vessels on the opposite shore, fearing they'd be forced to ferry soldiers or cargo. The remaining boats had already departed, overloaded with people, buffeted about by the weight and the storm, and reportedly in danger of capsizing any moment. Not a cart, horse, or other means of transportation could be found to escape the army's path. Don Abbondio wouldn't have

been able to travel very far on foot, and he feared being overtaken on the road. The Bergamo territory was close enough that his legs could have gotten him there in a single stretch. But everyone knew that a contingent of *cappelletti*, mercenaries in the employ of Venice, had been quickly dispatched to Bergamo to guard the border and keep the Landsknechts out, though the cappelletti themselves were nearly as diabolical as the intruders. The poor man rushed about the house, in a panic and at wit's end. He followed Perpetua around so they could agree on a course of action. But she was busy gathering up the house's valuables and hiding them in the attic or a cubbyhole, and rushed past him, out of breath and worried, with her hands and arms full. "Right now, I'm going to finish putting these things in a safe place. Then we'll do what everyone else is doing," she replied. Don Abbondio kept trying to detain her to discuss their various alternatives. But between the hustle and bustle, the panic that she, too, could feel in her bones, and her irritation at her master's fears, her patience had run thin.

"Everyone else is doing their best. So will we. Excuse me, but don't you have something else to do besides getting in my way? Don't you realize that we are all trying to save our skin? Do you think the soldiers are coming only for you? You might give me a hand at a time like this instead of getting in my way with your whining and fretting." With this and other such retorts, she dismissed him, having already decided, once she had finished her hasty operation as best she could, to take him by the arm like a child, and drag him up a mountain.

Left to his own devices, Don Abbondio went to the window, looked out, and listened carefully. Seeing someone pass by, he called out in a voice both plaintive and reproachful: "An act of charity for your poor priest! Please find him a horse, a mule, a donkey. How is it that no one wants to help me? What kind of people are you? At least wait for me so that I can come with you. Wait until there's at least fifteen or twenty of us, then lead me away in company, so I won't be left here alone. Do you want to leave me in the hands of dogs? Don't you realize that most of them are Lutherans,

and they think that murdering a priest would be a good deed? Do you want to leave me here to be martyred? What kind of people are you? What kind of people?"

But to whom was he speaking? To men walking past, stooped over from the weight of their humble possessions, thinking of what they had left behind, driving their cows before them, pulling behind them their children—who were also carrying as much as they could—and the women holding the little ones who couldn't walk. Some trudged forward, without replying or looking up. Some said, "Ah, Reverend! Do what you can. At least you don't have a family to worry about. You've got to fend for yourself. Do your best."

"Woe is me!" exclaimed Don Abbondio. "What kind of people are these! Don't they have hearts! Is there no charity left in the world! Everyone is thinking only about themselves, and no one is thinking about me." And he turned around to look for Perpetua.

"There you are," she said. "And the money?"

"What should we do with it?"

"Give it to me, and I'll go bury it in the garden, together with the silverware."

"But . . ."

"No buts about it. Give it here. Keep the little that we might need. I'll take care of the rest."

Don Abbondio obeyed: He went to his desk, took out his savings, and handed them over to Perpetua. "I'm going to bury this in the garden, at the foot of the fig tree," she said, and went out.

She reappeared a little later, with one basket holding the food supplies and another small empty pack basket. She quickly started placing a few of her and her master's linens in the bottom, saying, "You could at least carry your breviary."

"Where are we going?"

"Where do you think? Where everyone else is headed. Let's get on the road first, then we can listen and decide the best thing to do."

In that moment, Agnese arrived at the door with a pack basket strapped to her back and the air of someone with an important proposal to make.

She had decided not to wait for the unwelcome guests—alone as she was, and still having a little of the Nameless One's money—and had spent a while debating where to seek refuge. The remainder of those scudi, which had come in so handy during the famine months, was the main reason for her anxiety and indecisiveness. She had heard that people with money had fared the worst in towns already invaded, exposed to both the violence of the foreigners and the treachery of their neighbors. It was true that she had not breathed a word of the fortune that had rained down on her from heaven, as they say, to anyone except Don Abbondio. Every now and then, she would come by and ask him to change a scudo, always leaving a little something extra for him to give to people less fortunate than herself. But hidden money, especially for someone not used to handling large amounts, keeps the owner in constant suspicion of others' suspicions. Now, as she, too, stashed away whatever she couldn't take with her, she remembered that the Nameless One had offered her the most generous favors when he sent her the money. She remembered the stories she had heard of his castle being situated in such a secure spot that the only ones who could reach it, in defiance of the master, were the birds. So she decided to go up there and ask him for shelter, but she needed someone to introduce her. Don Abbondio immediately came to mind. He had been making such a fuss over her ever since his conversation with the Archbishop, especially now that he no longer had to worry about his safety: The two young people were distant, so there was only a distant possibility that he might receive requests that would try his benevolence. She imagined that, with all the commotion, the poor man must be even more distressed and shocked than she was, and that her idea might appeal to him. Finding him with Perpetua, she explained her proposal to both of them.

"What do you think, Perpetua?" Don Abbondio asked.

"I think it's a godsend. Let's stop wasting time and start moving."

"And then?"

"And then? And then, we'll be fine once we get there. That man—

everyone knows he wants nothing more now than to help his neighbor, so he'll be more than happy to welcome us in. And there, on the border, and so high up, we won't need to worry about the soldiers coming. And then, we'll find something to eat, too. Because, up in the mountains, once we've finished these gifts from God"—as she spoke, she placed some food inside the basket, on top of the linens—"we'll be in quite a predicament."

"Converted? But is he truly converted?"

"How could anyone doubt it now, after everything we know, and after what you yourself have seen?"

"What if we're headed for a trap?"

"A trap? Excuse me, but with all your dithering, we would have never reached a decision. Well done, Agnese! Good idea!" Setting the pack basket on a small table, she slipped her arms through the straps and pulled it over her shoulders.

"Couldn't we find," Don Abbondio interjected, "some man to come with us, willing to escort his parish priest? If we run into a scoundrel—and unfortunately there's more than a few of them around—what help would the two of you be?"

"More excuses, just to waste time!" exclaimed Perpetua. "Do you really think we should go looking for someone? It's every man for himself now. Chin up. Go fetch your breviary and hat, and we'll be on our way."

Don Abbondio left and came back a moment later with the breviary under his arm, his hat on his head, and his walking stick in hand. All three of them went out by a small door that opened onto the piazza. Perpetua locked it behind her—more as a formality than out of any faith in that lock or those shutters—and put the keys in her pocket. As they passed the church, Don Abbondio cast a glance at it, muttering to himself, "The people'll have to look after it, since it's there to serve them. If they have some feeling for their church, they will. If not, so much the worse for them."

They went through the fields, quietly quietly, each one contemplating his or her own situation, and glancing around—especially

Don Abbondio—to see if any suspicious or unusual characters were lurking. They didn't run into anyone. Everyone was either indoors—guarding their house, packing up, or hiding their belongings—or on the trails leading up the mountain. After huffing, puffing, and occasionally bursting out with some interjection, Don Abbondio started to grumble even more. He complained about the Duke of Nevers, who could have stayed in France and amused himself by playing the Prince, but no, he wanted to be the Duke of Mantua, the world be damned. As for the Emperor, he should have shown more sense than the others, let the river run its course, and not taken offense at every little thing. After all, he's still the Emperor in the end, no matter who becomes Duke of Mantua. The person who irked him the most, however, was the Governor, who should have done everything in his power to keep scourges away from the country, but was too busy attracting them, all for the fun of waging war. "Those gentlemen should be here," he said, "to see for themselves how much fun this is. They have a lot to answer for! In the meantime, the innocent always get caught in the middle."

"Forget about them. They're not coming to save us," Perpetua said. "Forgive me, but this is just your usual chatter, going around and around in circles. But do you know what's worrying me?"

"What?"

Perpetua, who, on that stretch of the road, had found plenty of time to ponder her mad dash to hide things, started to complain that she'd forgotten this, misplaced that, here left footprints that could guide the thieves, there . . .

"Good work!" exclaimed Don Abbondio, convinced by now that he was safe enough to fret about his possessions. "Good work! What did you do? What were you thinking?"

"I beg your pardon?" replied Perpetua, squaring up for a moment on her two feet and placing her hands on her hips as best she could manage with the pack basket on her back. "I beg your pardon? Now you turn around and scold me when you're the one who made me lose my mind rather than helping me out and encouraging me!

I was more worried about the household things than my own. I had to be both Martha and Magdalene, with no one to give me a hand.* If anything goes wrong, I'm not the one to blame. I went above and beyond the call of duty!"

Agnese interrupted this spat by bringing up her own troubles. Rather than complain about discomfort and damage, she was despairing over when she could embrace her Lucia again. Because, if you recall, they had arranged to meet that fall. But given the circumstances, no one could presume that Donna Prassede had any intention of taking her holiday in these parts. In fact, if she had already been staying there, she would have left, like all the other vacationers.

The sight of these familiar places made her thoughts more vivid, her sorrow more piercing. From the footpath, they entered the main road: the same one the poor woman had traveled to bring her daughter back home, for such a brief moment, after their stay at the tailor's house. And now the village was already coming into view.

"We should stop to say hello to those good people," said Agnese.

"And also to rest for a bit and a bite to eat. I'm getting tired of carrying this basket," added Perpetua.

"As long as we don't waste time," proclaimed Don Abbondio. "We're not here for pleasure."

They were welcomed with open arms and great joy, for their arrival was a reminder of a good deed. Do good to as many people as you can—our author writes at this point—and you will be rewarded many times over with faces that lift your spirits.

Agnese broke down in tears when she embraced the good woman, which came as a great relief. Between sobs, she replied to the woman's and her husband's inquiries about Lucia.

* Mary of Bethany (whom tradition has often confused with Mary Magdalene) and Martha were the sisters of Lazarus, whom Jesus raised from the dead. In Luke 10: 38–42, Mary sat at the table to listen to Jesus, while Martha complained that she had to do all the work herself.

"She's better off than us," interjected Don Abbondio. "She's in Milan, far away from danger, and far away from all this devilry."

"You two are also fleeing?" the tailor asked the priest and his companion.

"Of course," the master and the servant replied as one.

"My sympathies."

"We're headed for the castle of ***," added Don Abbondio.

"Good thinking: You'll be as safe up there as in church."

"But aren't you afraid to stay here?" asked Don Abbondio.

"Let me tell you, Reverend. I don't imagine the soldiers will be coming to this village for lodgment—the correct term, I'm sure you know—since, thank goodness, we're too far off their path. Maybe a raid, at most, God forbid. But in any case, we've still got time. We're waiting first to hear more about how the poor villages fared where the soldiers do end up stopping."

The little group decided to stay for a bit to catch their breath. And since it was mealtime: "Good people," proposed the tailor, "you must honor my poor table. Just potluck. Something simple."

Perpetua mentioned that she also had a little something to break the fast. After polite refusals from one side and the other, they agreed to pool their resources, as they say, and dine together.

The children gathered joyfully around their old friend Agnese. Quickly quickly, the tailor ordered one girl (the daughter who had brought the bundle of food to the widow Maria: Do you remember her?) to shell a few of the early chestnuts stored in a corner, and set them by the fire to roast.

"And you," he said to a boy, "go to the orchard and shake the peach tree, just enough for a few to drop, and bring them here: all of them!" "And you," he said to another, "go to the fig tree and pick the ripest fruit. You know how to do it!" He himself went to tap some wine from a barrel. His wife got out the table linen, Perpetua dug out their provisions, and the table was set: a napkin and a majolica dish at the place of honor, for Don Abbondio, along with silverware that Perpetua had brought in her basket. They sat down

and ate, if not so cheerfully, then at least with greater happiness than any of them had expected to feel on that day.

"What do you think of all this turmoil, Reverend?" asked the tailor. "It's like a story you'd read about the Moors in France!"

"What can I say? Why did this, too, have to happen to me!"

"Well, you've chosen a good refuge," the tailor continued. "Who the devil would go all the way up there? And you'll be in good company. I hear that many people have taken shelter there, and more still are arriving."

"I only hope," said Don Abbondio, "that we will be welcome. I know that good man. And when I had the honor to meet him on another occasion, he was such a gentleman!"

"As for me," said Agnese, "he told His Eminence the Cardinal that if I ever needed anything, all I had to do was go to him."

"His conversion was so wonderful!" Don Abbondio continued. "And he's kept it up, hasn't he? He's kept it up."

The tailor started to describe in minute detail the holy life of the Nameless One and how he had gone from being the scourge of the area to its model citizen and benefactor.

"What about the people who surrounded him? . . . All those attendants?" asked Don Abbondio, who had heard talk of his bravi more than once, but never stayed quiet long enough to listen.

"He dismissed most of them," the tailor replied. "And the ones that remained have changed their ways, they really have. The castle has become a kind of hermitage: But you, of course, know all about such places."

He then started to reminisce about the Cardinal's visit with Agnese. "What a great man!" he said. "A great man! A shame that he visited you for such a short time, and I didn't even have the chance to pay him some honor. I would be so happy to speak with him again, with a little more leisure."

When they got up from the table, he showed her a print of the Cardinal that he had attached to one side of the door, in homage to the man, but also so he could tell anyone who came by, from one who knows, that it didn't look anything like the man. Because he'd

had a chance to see the Cardinal in person, up close and at length, in this very room.

"Is that supposed to be him? That thing there?" asked Agnese. "Maybe the habit, but the rest . . ."

"It's not much of a resemblance, you're right," said the tailor. "I always say the same thing myself. They can't fool us, can they? But at least his name is underneath: I keep it as a souvenir."

Don Abbondio wanted to get moving. The tailor promised to find a cart that would take them to the foot of the hill, and he went looking for one immediately. A little later, he came back to tell them that one was on its way. He then turned to Don Abbondio, saying, "Reverend, should you ever want me to bring you a book up there, to pass the time, I offer my humble services. Since I also like to read a little myself. Nothing like yourself, of course, only books in Italian, not Latin. But . . ."

"Thank you, thank you," replied Don Abbondio. "In times like these, the required readings are just about all a person can manage."

As they were saying their "thank-yous" and "think nothing of its," exchanging farewells and best wishes, invitations and promises to visit on their trip home, the cart arrived at the front door. They strapped on their pack baskets, climbed on, and began the second half of their trip less worried and with a little more peace of mind.

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The tailor was right about the Nameless One. From the day we left him, he continued to fulfill his promises, make reparations for his wrongs, plead for peace, and help the poor—in short, always doing good whenever the occasion arose. The same courage he had once demonstrated in attacking and defending, he now demonstrated by doing neither one nor the other. He always went out alone, unarmed, ready for any repercussions he might face for all the violent deeds he had committed, and convinced it would be yet another such deed if he used force to defend someone—himself—who was responsible for so much violence to so many; and convinced that any wrong done to him would be an offense to God, yes, but also

just retribution toward himself; and that he had no right to punish such an offense.

Nevertheless, he was just as inviolate now as he had been when he used to arm himself and many others for his own security. The memory of his past aggressions, which should have incited many to revenge, and the sight of his present meekness, which would have made it even easier, conspired instead to earn him admiration, and to keep it, as his main protection. He was the man whom no one could humble, yet had now humbled himself. The grudges, which had once been aggravated by his contempt for others and their fear of him, disappeared in the face of his newfound humility. Against all expectations, and without danger, his victims had received a satisfaction that even the most successful revenge could never have attained: the satisfaction of seeing him atone for his crimes, and share, so to speak, in their own indignation. There were many who, for years, had been intensely, bitterly frustrated at never being in a position to get the better of him, or to be redeemed for some great wrong he had done them. Now, when they encountered him alone, unarmed, acting like he would put up no resistance, their only impulse was to commend him.

Through that voluntary humiliation, his presence and bearing had acquired, without his realizing it, something loftier and more noble, since even more than before, one could see the absence of all fear in him. Even the most raw and passionate hatred seemed to be restrained and held in check by the public veneration of this penitent and charitable man. So great was this veneration that he was often embarrassed by the accolades bestowed on him. To avoid being overly glorified, he had to be careful not to allow his face or his actions to show too much of his inner compunction, and not to overly humble himself. As his place in church he chose the last pew, and there was no danger that anyone would take it away from him, for to do so would have been to usurp a place of honor. To insult this man, or treat him with disrespect, would seem not so much an act of insolence or cowardice as a sacrilege. And the people who

might have been restrained by such feelings also shared them to some extent.

These and other reasons also shielded him from the vengeance of the law, and procured for him the security that he himself scorned. His rank and relations, which had always protected him, served him even more since his illustrious though infamous name was now complemented by praise for his exemplary conduct and the glory of his conversion. The judges and grandees, like the people, openly rejoiced in this. And it would have been strange to go after so highly praised a man. Not to mention that a government engaged in an ongoing and often unsuccessful battle against active and recurrent uprisings must have been happy not to have to worry any longer about one of the most indomitable and vexing rebels, especially since the Nameless One's conversion had freely offered such unexpected and beneficial reparations. Harassing a saint did not seem like a good way to undo their embarrassment at having failed to bring a criminal to heel. Punishing him would only serve to dissuade others of his kind from ceasing their criminal activities.

The role that Cardinal Federigo had played in his conversion, and the association of their two names, might also have given him a sacred shield. In those days, there was a peculiar relationship between Church and State. The two were often in conflict, though they never tried to destroy each other, and often lessened their hostilities toward one another through acts of appreciation and deference, sometimes working together to pursue a common goal without ever making peace. This situation might make it seem as if reconciliation with spiritual authority had encouraged, if not the absolution, then at least the forgetfulness of the secular authorities, when in fact the Church had always worked to deliver the result that both parties desired.

If the Nameless One had been toppled, his enemies great and small would have competed to trample on him; since he prostrated himself voluntarily, he was spared by all, and revered by many.

However, not everyone was pleased with his amazing transformation: Many hired killers and fellows in crime lost a powerful

leader on whom they had depended. Plots organized long before were suddenly called off, just moments before they were supposed to be executed. But we already know how the thugs in his service reacted when they heard him announce his conversion: with dismay, sorrow, dejection, aggravation—a little of everything, except for contempt or hatred. His men who were stationed elsewhere as well as his accomplices in high places all felt the same way when they heard the terrible news, and all of them for the same reasons. According to Ripamonti, these men reserved their hatred, instead, for Cardinal Federigo. They believed that he had meddled in their affairs expressly to ruin their livelihoods. The Nameless One had only wanted to save his soul; no one could begrudge him that.

Little by little, most of the household thugs had left, unable to adjust to the new order, and seeing no probability of change. Some might have gone looking for another master, perhaps among the old friends of the man they had left. Some might have enlisted in a regiment—a *tercio* as it was then called—of Spain, Mantua, or another party to a conflict. Some might have gone on the road, to become highwaymen, responsible only to themselves. Still others might even have been happy with a life of random crime. The men who used to be under his command in scattered towns probably followed the same pattern. As for those who adapted to the new regime, or willingly embraced it, most had returned to farming, since they were natives of the valley, or to trades they had learned in their early years but later abandoned. The foreigners remained in the castle as servants. Both groups, rebaptized at nearly the same time as their master, lived like he did, unharmed and respected, without giving or receiving offense.

When the German marauders descended, and refugees from the invaded or threatened towns arrived at the castle seeking shelter, the Nameless One was pleased that the vulnerable now saw his walls as a sanctuary rather than as a dark specter in the distance. He welcomed them with expressions of gratitude rather than courtesy. He let it be known that his home was open to anyone who needed shelter, and he immediately thought to fortify both his castle and

the valley against invasion from the Landsknechts or cappelletti. He gathered together the remaining servants, few and valiant (as in the verses of Giovanni Torti), and gave them a speech on the wonderful opportunity that God had given all of them to help the neighbors they had once oppressed and terrorized.* Then, with that natural tone of command which knows it will be obeyed, he announced his general plan. First and foremost, he issued guidelines on how to behave so the new arrivals would see them as friends and defenders. He then instructed them to bring the firearms, swords, and pikes down from an attic room where they had long been stored and to distribute them. He sent word to his peasants and tenants in the valley that anyone who wished could come to the castle with their weapons. Anyone who didn't have a weapon would be provided with one. He appointed a few men as officers, and placed others under their command. He established pickets at the entrances to the valley and other places, as well as on the hill and at the gates of the castle. He scheduled rounds and rotations, like in a military camp, as had been the custom at the castle during his dissolute past life.

In one corner of that attic room, separate from all the rest, were the weapons that he alone had carried: his notorious carbine, his muskets, swords, cutlasses, pistols, knives, and daggers, now lying on the floor or leaning against the wall. None of the servants dared to touch them, but they agreed to ask their master which ones he wanted. "None," he replied. Whether it was a vow or a resolution, he would always remain unarmed, at the head of this makeshift garrison.

At the same time, he mobilized other servants, or his employees, to prepare accommodations in the castle for as many people as possible, to set up beds and arrange pallets stuffed with straw or wool in rooms large and small, which then became dormitories. And he ordered ample provisions to feed however many guests God would

* Giovanni Torti (1774–1852), a friend of Manzoni, was a poet, whose best known work was his tribute "La visione di Parini" (1806).

send him, whose numbers, in fact, grew by the day. In the meantime, he was never still. Inside and outside the castle, up and down the hill, moving about the valley, to establish, reinforce, and visit posts, to see and be seen, to create and maintain order, through his words, his eyes, and his presence. And everyone, whether they had seen him before or were seeing him now for the first time, stared in astonishment, forgetting for a moment the troubles and fears that had driven them there. And they turned around to stare again when, taking his leave, he continued on his way.

Chapter 30

Although most people were streaming in from the opposite end of the valley, our three refugees started to run into fellow travelers and fellows in misfortune, who had entered or were entering the main road from various crossroads and footpaths. Any person you meet in such circumstances seems like an old acquaintance. Every time the cart pulled alongside a pedestrian, questions and answers were exchanged. Some, like our protagonists, had fled without waiting for the soldiers to arrive. Some had heard their trumpets and drums. And some had seen them, depicting them as the terrified are wont to depict.

"We've been lucky," said the two women, "thank heavens. Who cares about our things? At least we're safe."

But Don Abbondio found little to be happy about. Indeed, that confluence of people, especially the greater numbers he could hear arriving from the opposite end of the valley, was making him wary. "What is going on here?" he grumbled to the women when they were alone for a moment. "What is going on? Don't you realize that gathering so many people in one place is practically begging the soldiers to come? With all the hiding and removal of things, nothing's left in the houses. They're going to think there's treasure up there. They will surely be coming: Surely they will. Woe is me! What have I gotten myself into?"

"The last thing they'll want to do is go up there," said Perpetua. "They've got other places to be. And I've always heard that, in times of danger, there's safety in numbers."

"In numbers? In numbers?" replied Don Abbondio. "Poor

woman! Don't you know that a single Landsknecht could eat a hundred of us for lunch? And then, if they do go rogue, we'll get caught in the middle! Oh, poor me! We'd have been better off going up the mountains! Why did everyone have to rush toward the same place! . . . What pests!" he grumbled in a lower voice. "They're all here: rush, rush, rush. One after the other, like mindless sheep."

"That's what you think," said Agnese, "but they could say the same thing about us."

"Shush," said Don Abbondio. "Enough with all this chatter. What's done is done. We're here, and here we stay. It's up to Providence now. May God help us."

But things got even worse at the entrance to the valley, where he saw a group of armed men milling about the doorway and ground floor of a house: It looked like a barracks. He glanced at them out of the corner of his eye; these didn't look like the same faces he had seen on his previous stressful trip, or if some were, they had changed considerably. Nonetheless, he was distressed beyond words by the sight. "Poor me!" he thought. "What if they get violent? And how could they not? I should have expected as much from a man like him. What does he want to do? To wage war? To be king? Him? Poor me! When everyone is just trying to find a hole in which to hide, he's doing his best to be conspicuous. You'd think he wanted to invite them in!"

"Now, master, you can see for yourself," Perpetua said, "look at the brave men we have here. They'll know how to defend us from the German soldiers; not like the scaredy-cats we've got back home, who are good for nothing except heading for the hills."

"Shush!" replied Don Abbondio, in a low but angry voice. "Shush! You don't know what you're talking about. Pray to heaven those soldiers are in a hurry, or that they don't find out what's going on up here. This place is being turned into a fortress. Don't you know it's a soldier's job to take fortresses? They like nothing better! Launching an attack, going to a wedding: It's all the same to them. Everything they touch instantly belongs to them, and they'll run people through with their swords. Woe is me! Anyway. I'll see if there's a

way to get us up these cliffs to safety. They won't catch me in a battle. Oh, no, they won't."

"Well, if you're afraid of being defended and helped," Perpetua started to say, but Don Abbondio interrupted her in a harsh, low voice: "Shush! I'm warning you not to repeat what I said. Remember that while we're here, we have to keep a smile on our faces and agree with everything we see."

At the Malanotte, they found another group of armed men. Don Abbondio tipped his hat to them, while thinking, "Woe is me. I'm in the belly of the beast!" Here the cart came to a stop, and they got out. Don Abbondio paid quickly and sent the driver on his way. He started walking up the hill with his two companions without saying a word. The sight of these familiar places, combined with his present fears, reawakened the memory of his sufferings the last time he had been here. And Agnese, who had never laid eyes on the area, imagined a nightmarish scenario whenever she thought of Lucia's harrowing ordeal. She felt a new and sharper sense of those cruel memories now that she saw the castle. "Oh, Reverend!" she exclaimed. "To think that my poor Lucia went up this road!"

"Will you be quiet, you silly woman!" Don Abbondio shouted in her ear. "Is that anything to say at a time like this? Don't you realize we're at his home? You're lucky no one heard you just now. But if you keep talking this way . . ."

"Oh!" said Agnese. "But now that he's a saint . . . !"

"Be quiet!" Don Abbondio repeated. "Do you think you can tell a saint anything you want, showing him no regard? What you really should be thinking about is how you'll thank him for all his kindness!"

"Well, I already have; do you think I don't know a thing or two about proper etiquette?"

"Proper etiquette is not saying anything that might upset someone, especially someone who's not used to hearing criticism. You both need to understand that this is no place for gossip or blurting out everything that pops into your head. It's the house of a great nobleman, as you already know. Look at the company we're in:

These are people from all walks of life. So use your heads, if you're capable. Weigh your words, and above all, speak little, and only when necessary. With your mouth shut you'll never be wrong."

"You're much worse with all your—" Perpetua started to retort.

"Be quiet," Don Abbondio hissed under his breath, at the same time as he quickly doffed his hat and made a deep bow. For as he looked up, he spotted the Nameless One walking downhill toward them. The nobleman had also seen and recognized Don Abbondio, and he quickened his step to meet him.

"Reverend Father," he said as he drew near, "I wish I was offering you hospitality on a better occasion, but I am still very happy to be of some service."

"Trusting in the great generosity of your most illustrious Lordship," replied Don Abbondio, "I have been so bold as to come, in these unhappy circumstances, to inconvenience you. And as your most illustrious Lordship can see, I have also taken the liberty of bringing some company with me. This is my housekeeper . . ."

"Welcome," said the Nameless One.

"And this," Don Abbondio continued, "is a woman your Lordship has already been good to: the mother of that . . . of that . . ."

"Of Lucia," said Agnese.

"Of Lucia!" exclaimed the Nameless One, who turned to Agnese, bowing his head. "Me? Good? Lord God! It is you who are being good to me by coming here . . . to me . . . to this home. You are most welcome. You are the one bestowing your blessing on us."

"Oh, yes," said Agnese. "I am coming to inconvenience you." Then she added, whispering in his ear, "I also have to thank you . . ."

The Nameless One interrupted her, inquiring anxiously for news of Lucia. He then turned to accompany his new guests up to the castle, which he did, despite their protests. Agnese gave the priest a look as if to say, "Do you really think there was any need to stick your nose in with your advice?"

"Have they already reached your parish?" the Nameless One asked him.

"No, sir, but I did not want to sit around waiting for those devils,"

replied Don Abbondio. "If I had, heaven knows whether I would have made it out alive, to come and inconvenience your illustrious Lordship."

"Well, take heart," the Nameless One resumed, "now you're safe. They won't be coming up here. And if they try, we're ready for them."

"Let's hope they don't come," said Don Abbondio. "And I hear," he added, pointing at the mountains rising on the opposite end of the valley, "I hear that, over there, the other troops are roaming, but . . . but . . ."

"True," said the Nameless One. "But don't worry, we're ready for them, too."

"Between a rock and a hard place," thought Don Abbondio. "Right between a rock and a hard place. How did I end up here? Blame it on those two chatterboxes! And he seems to be reveling in it! What is wrong with the people of this world?"

After they entered the castle, the nobleman directed Agnese and Perpetua to a room in the quarter assigned to women, which took up three sides of the second courtyard, in the rear of the building. It stood on an isolated rock jutting out over a cliff. The men were lodged on the right and left sides of the other courtyard, which looked out on the terrace. The two courtyards were connected by a wide corridor facing the main gate, which served as a storage area for food supplies and any belongings that the refugees might have brought with them for safekeeping. In the men's quarter, there were a few rooms set aside for members of the clergy. The Nameless One took it upon himself to accompany Don Abbondio, who was the first to take possession of them.

For twenty-three or twenty-four days, our refugees stayed in the castle, surrounded by constant motion and a crowd of people that kept growing initially, though nothing out of the ordinary happened. Scarcely a day went by without an alarm being sounded. The Landsknechts are coming! The cappelletti have been spotted! At every alarm, the Nameless One sent his men out to investigate, and, if

trouble was found, he would leave the valley with the men he kept on the alert, and go to where the danger had been reported. They were a sight to behold: a brigade of men armed from head to toe, marching in military formation, but led by an unarmed man. Usually all they found were random foragers and looters who would flee before they could be caught. But once, while chasing away some looters as a warning to never come back, the Nameless One received news that a nearby village had been invaded and sacked. Landsknechts from various divisions had lingered behind to plunder, joining forces and staging surprise attacks on territories near where the army was quartered. They would rob the inhabitants of their possessions and subject them to every kind of outrage. The Nameless One gave a short speech to his men and led them to the village.

Their arrival was unexpected. The rogues, who had thought they could make easy work of looting, found themselves instead under attack by men in battle formation, ready to fight. They dropped everything and fled without waiting for one another, heading back in the direction from which they had come. The Nameless One chased them part of the way. Then, calling a halt, he lingered for a bit to see if there were any further developments. Finally, he ordered the return home. As he went back through the rescued village, you cannot imagine the applause and the thanks that greeted the troop of liberators and their leader.

At the castle, among the jumbled multitude of people of various classes, customs, ages, and sexes, there was never any major conflict. The Nameless One had posted guards at multiple locations, to make sure that no disturbances occurred, and each did his job with the care required when one is held accountable.

He then asked the clergymen and the most authoritative men among the refugees to make the rounds and help keep an eye on things. He himself also made the rounds as often as he could and made sure he was seen everywhere. But even in his absence, a reminder of whose house they were staying in helped to control those

who might need to be controlled. They were refugees, after all, and therefore generally more inclined to be peaceful; thoughts of their homes and belongings, and—for some—of family or friends still in danger, as well as the news that kept arriving, dampened their spirits and maintained and increased that disposition.

There were a few carefree types, men with a steadier temperament and youthful energy, who tried to pass the days more cheerfully. They had abandoned their homes because they were not strong enough to defend them, but they saw no point in sighing and crying over things that couldn't be fixed, or in imagining and contemplating the devastation they would unfortunately see with their own eyes. Close families had traveled to the castle together, or met up there, and new friendships had been formed. The guests split into groups by disposition and customs. The ones with money and discretion went to eat down in the valley, where a few taverns had sprung up to meet the moment's needs. In some of these taverns, mouthfuls alternated with sighs, and disasters were the only topic of conversation; in others, disaster was never mentioned, except for advice to avoid thinking about it. For those unable or unwilling to buy their food outside, bread, soup, and wine were distributed in the castle. A few tables were also prepared every day for guests whom the master had specially invited. And our three friends were among this number.

Agnese and Perpetua, who did not want a free meal, asked to be employed in the services that such large-scale hospitality required. So this is how they spent most of their day. The rest of the time they spent chatting with the other women or with Don Abbondio. Although he had nothing to do, he wasn't bored: Fear kept him company. He had gotten over any fear of an attack, I believe; if any did remain, it was the least of his worries, since, if he thought about it even a tiny bit, he must have realized that his fears were baseless. But, beyond agonizing over his poor house, he was beset by a constant, vague, general terror at the image of the surrounding country swarming with vicious soldiers, the sight of arms and armed men

always and everywhere, the castle—that castle!—and the fear that, given the circumstances, anything could happen, at any moment. During his entire stay in that refuge, he never went farther than a stone's throw outside, and never once set foot on the path down the hill. The only walk he took was on the terrace, or from one end of the castle to the other, to look down the cliffs and ravines, and examine whether there might be some viable pathway, a mountain trail that might help him find a hiding place in the event of hand-to-hand combat. He paid great respects and gave warm greetings to all his fellow refugees, but he associated with only a few. His most frequent conversations were with the two women, as I have mentioned. With them he let off steam, at the risk of a scolding from Perpetua and a shaming from Agnese. At the communal table, where he spent little time and spoke even less, he heard the news of the terrifying march, which arrived daily, reported from village to village and mouth to mouth, or brought to them by someone who had initially tried to stay home but ultimately fled, without managing to save anything, and, to make matters worse, was beaten black and blue.

Every day brought a new tale of catastrophe. Some, storytellers by profession, diligently collected all the rumors, sifted through them, and conveyed their essence to the others. There were debates over which regiment was more ferocious, and whether the infantry or the cavalry was worse. They would recite, as best they could, the names of certain leaders and relate their exploits, specifying where they had stopped and where they had marched. On such and such a day, this regiment or that invaded this or that village, and tomorrow they would attack others, and in the meantime yet another regiment had raised hell and worse. Above all, the storytellers scrambled to get information and keep track of the regiments that crossed the Lecco bridge, one after the other, so they could mark them off as departed, and gone from the area for good.

The Wallenstein cavalry passed, then the Merode infantry, then the Anhalt cavalry, then the Brandenburg infantry, the Montecuc-

coli and Ferrari cavalry. Then the Altringer, Fürstenberg, and Colloredo all passed, followed by the Croatians and the Conti. More and more passed and finally, when it pleased the heavens, so did Gallas.* The flying squadron of the Venetians finally left, as well, and the whole region, from right to left, was free.

The people from the first areas invaded and evacuated had already left the castle, and more were departing every day, like birds after an autumn storm, scattering from the leafy branches of the big tree in which they had sought shelter and flying off in every direction. Our three friends were among the last to go, I believe. And this at the wish of Don Abbondio, who feared, if he returned home immediately, that he would find stray Landsknechts who had lingered behind in the wake of the passing army. Perpetua gave him a piece of her mind, saying the longer they waited, the freer local rascals would feel to enter their house and carry away anything that was left. But when it came to saving his skin, Don Abbondio always won the argument, unless the proximity of danger made him lose his wits entirely.

On the day of their departure, the Nameless One ordered a carriage for them at the Malanotte. In it, he had placed a new set of linen for Agnese. Taking her aside, he pressed her to accept a purse filled with scudi, which she could use to repair the damage she would find at home, despite her protests, beating her breast, and assuring him that she still had some left over from his last gift.

"When you see your poor, good Lucia," he said at last, "who I know is already praying for me, please tell her, since I did her so much wrong, that I am grateful, and that I trust in God her prayers will also bestow many blessings on her."

* The men referred to led the siege of Mantua: Albrecht von Wallenstein (1583–1634); Count Johann II von Merode (1589?–1633); Prince Louis I of Anhalt-Köthen (1579–1650); Count Ernesto Montecuccoli (1582–1633); Pietro Ferrari; Count Johann Altringer (1588–1634); Egon VIII of Fürstenberg-Heiligenberg (1588–1635); Count Rudolf von Colloredo-Waldsee (1585–1657); Torquato Conti (1591–1636); and Matthias Gallas (1584–1647).

He insisted on accompanying all three down to the carriage. I will allow the reader to imagine the humble, groveling thank-yous of Don Abbondio and the compliments of Perpetua. Finally, they left. As planned, they made a short stop at the tailor's cottage, but did not stay long enough to sit. There they heard a hundred stories about the army's passage: the usual tales of robberies, beatings, vandalism, and filth. But no Landsknechts, thank goodness, had been sighted in that area.

"Oh, Reverend!" said the tailor, helping him back up into the carriage. "After a disaster like this, there's enough material for a few books!"

A little bit farther down the road, our travelers started to see with their own eyes some of the things they had heard described: vineyards picked clean, not like in the harvest but as if struck by a combination of hail and hurricane—shoots torn away and scattered everywhere; fenceposts ripped out; the ground trampled and strewn with splinters, leaves, and twigs; trees uprooted or stripped of their branches; gaps in the hedges and gates destroyed. And then in the villages, doorways had been broken down, windows smashed, and straw, rags, and rubbish of every kind was amassed or strewn on the road. The air was thick, and wafts of an even worse stench drifted out from the houses. Some people were tossing out the filth, others were fixing the shutters as best they could, and still others commiserated in groups. As the carriage passed, hands stretched out toward the window from every side, begging for charity.

With these images before their eyes one second, and in their minds the next, as well as the expectation that they would find more of the same at home, they arrived and found, in fact, exactly what they had been expecting.

Agnese set her bundles down in a corner of her little yard, which was now the cleanest spot in her home, and immediately started sweeping, gathering and putting into order the few things she had left. She sent for a carpenter and a blacksmith to repair the worst of the damages, and then, inspecting her new linens piece by piece,

and counting the new coins, she said to herself, "I've landed on my feet. Blessed be the Lord and the Madonna and that kind gentleman. I really can say that I've landed on my feet."

Don Abbondio and Perpetua did not need keys to enter their house. With every step down the hall, an odor grew stronger—fetid, poisonous, pestilential—and turned their stomachs. Holding their noses, they headed toward the kitchen doorway. Entering on tiptoe, they examined the floor to see where they could set their feet down, avoiding as best they could the filth that covered it. They took a long look around. Nothing had been left in one piece. In every corner of that room and the rest of the house, all they could see were bits and pieces of things that used to be: quills and feathers from Perpetua's hens, strips of bed linen, paper torn from Don Abbondio's calendars, shards of broken pots and plates, all in heaps or strewn around the room. In the fireplace, they could see the vestiges of wholesale looting, jumbled together, like the too many ideas underlying the prose of a stylish writer. These were, as I was saying, the remains of spent charcoal and embers that, upon closer inspection, turned out to have been the arm of a chair, the leg of a table, the door of a cabinet, the slat of a bed, the stave of the barrel that used to hold the wine that settled poor Don Abbondio's stomach. All the rest was ashes and charcoal. And with these same bits of charcoal, the looters, for fun, had scribbled stick figures on the wall, trying—by adding birettas or tonsures and wide bands—to make them look like priests, taking great pains to make them horrible and ridiculous: a goal, to tell the truth, that was easy to achieve for such artists.

"What pigs!" exclaimed Perpetua. "What scoundrels!" exclaimed Don Abbondio. As if to escape, they ran outside through the garden door. They caught their breath, and then went straight to the fig tree. Before they even reached it, they saw that the ground had been freshly dug, and they both cried out at once. When they got there, they found not the body but the empty grave. And here a squabble began. Don Abbondio started to blame Perpetua for not burying his valuables properly. And do you think she held back?

After shouting at each other long and loud, each with an arm outstretched and a finger pointing at the hole, they went back in the house together, grumbling. Keep in mind that everywhere they looked, they found more or less the same thing. God only knows how they toiled to clean and disinfect the house, especially since it was so difficult to find help in those days. I have no idea how long they had to camp there, settling in for better or worse, and replacing, little by little, doors, furniture, and utensils with money lent by Agnese.

On top of it, the disaster pointed to another vexing issue. Perpetua, by dint of inquiring and questioning, snooping and sniffing around, had come to find out that some of her master's household goods, which they had thought the soldiers looted or destroyed, were instead safe and sound in the homes of their fellow villagers. She nagged her master to go after them, and retrieve what belonged to him. But you could not have touched on a more sensitive subject for Don Abbondio, since his things ended up in the hands of rascals, the very people he tried hardest to appease.

"What if I don't want to hear another word about it?" he said. "How many times do I have to tell you that what's gone is gone? Do I have to be nailed to the cross because my house has been robbed?"

"If it were up to you," answered Perpetua, "you'd let them carve your eyes out. It's a sin to rob from others, but it's not a sin to rob from you?"

"I can't believe my ears," replied Don Abbondio. "Will you please shut up!"

Perpetua held her tongue, but not for long, and she would take every opportunity to start up again. Eventually the poor man had to stop complaining every time he found something missing right when he needed it. Otherwise—and more than once—he'd have to listen to her say, "Go and ask the person who has it, who wouldn't have kept it this long if they'd had to answer to a real man."

Another, sharper source of apprehension was rumors that deserters were passing by every day, just as he had suspected, which kept him in a constant state of panic that one man or a whole com-

pany might show up at his door—the first thing that he had ordered repaired, and that he kept securely locked. Thank heavens, this never happened. No sooner had this fear subsided, however, then another one arrived to take its place.

At this point we will take our leave of the poor man, for there is much more at stake than his personal fears, the troubles of a few villages, or a temporary disaster.

Chapter 31

The plague that the Tribunal of Health had feared might enter the Milan area with the German troops really did enter, as is well known. Just as it is well known that the plague did not stop there, but went on to invade and depopulate a good part of Italy. Following the thread of our story, I will now recount the main events of that calamity in the Milan area, or should I say in Milan itself, since the memoirs from that period deal almost exclusively with the city, as is the case almost always and everywhere, for reasons both good and bad. And in all honesty, my aim in telling this story is not only to depict the situation in which our characters come to find themselves, but also for us to learn together, as best and as much as we can in this short space, a period of our country's history better known than it is understood.

Of the many contemporary reports, not a single one, by itself, provides a reasonably clear and orderly picture, although not a single one fails to help to formulate just such a picture. Each of these reports, even the one by Giuseppe Ripamonti—which surpasses all the others in the quantity and selection of incidents, and especially in his manner of observing them—omits essential details that the others, instead, include.* Each report contains factual errors that can be identified and corrected with the help of the others or of the few official records, both published and unpublished, that have survived: One might give you the causes while another de-

* Josephi Ripamonti, canonici scalensis, chronistae Urbis Mediolani, *De peste quae fuit anno 1630,* Libri V, *Mediolani* (n.p.: Apud Malatestas, 1641).

scribes only the effects, as if the two were disconnected. And all of them confuse chronology and events in strange ways, with a constant zigzagging, almost haphazard, and neither a general design nor even any details: These were common and glaring characteristics, after all, of the books of that period, at least in Italy, especially the ones written in the vernacular. Whether books in the rest of Europe were the same, the scholars may know, but I suspect they were.

No later writer has set out to examine and compare these accounts in order to depict a chain of events, a history of the plague. As a result, people generally have only a shaky and slightly confused notion of it: a vague idea of great suffering and great mistakes (there were truly unimaginable amounts of both); an idea consisting more of opinions than facts—a few random facts—and lacking, more often than not, the most characteristic situations of a clear chronology, by which I mean without an understanding of the cause and effect, course, and progress of the plague.

By examining and comparing with great diligence, if nothing else, all the printed reports, more than one unpublished account, and many of the few surviving so-called official documents, I have tried to put together not so much the account we need as one that has not yet been written. I have no intention of including all the official documents, or even all the somewhat noteworthy events. Nor do I wish to dissuade anyone who wishes to form a more comprehensive idea from reading the original reports. I feel too keenly the living, innate, and indescribable force, so to speak, that such works always have, no matter how they were conceived and conducted. I have only attempted to identify and verify the most well-known and important events, arrange them in chronological order, as best as reason and their nature will allow, and observe how they influenced one another, in order to provide, for now, a concise but honest and coherent account of that disaster, at least until someone produces a better version.

Throughout the strip of territory crossed by the army, dead bodies were found in houses and by the roadside. Not long after, in one

town or another, individuals and entire families started to fall ill and die of strange, violent ailments with symptoms that most of the living had never before seen. There were some people, however, to whom they were not new: the few who still remembered the plague that, fifty-three years earlier, had devastated much of Italy, especially in the area of Milan, where it was and is still known as the San Carlo Plague. Such is the power of charity! Amid the many varied and solemn memories of a general misfortune, charity assured that one man would stand out, a man whom it had inspired with feelings and actions that would be remembered long after the suffering was over. This suffering drove him to be a guide, relief, example, and voluntary victim, and would associate him indelibly with this troubled time. He became an emblem of the general calamity, so much so that it was named after him, like a land he had conquered or discovered.

Milan's chief medical officer, Lodovico Settala, had not only witnessed the earlier plague but had also been one of the most active, intrepid, and—despite his youth—reputable doctors. Now, harboring grave suspicions, he was on the alert for information. On the twentieth of October, he reported to the Tribunal of Health that the contagion had unquestionably broken out in Chiuso (the last village in the Lecco territory, bordering on the province of Bergamo). Yet the tribunal took no decisions, as indicated in the report written by Settala's lieutenant, Alessandro Tadino.*

Similar notifications soon arrived from Lecco and Bellano. Then the tribunal did come to a resolution, agreeing to send a commissioner to the two towns, with instructions to stop along the way in Como for a physician who could accompany him on his visits. Both men, "either from ignorance or another reason, allowed themselves to be persuaded by an ignorant old barber of Bellano that this type of ailment was not the plague" (Tadino, ivi). He claimed that, in

* Alessandro Tadino, *Raguaglio dell'origine et giornali successi della gran peste contagiosa, venefica, & malefica seguita nella Città di Milano, & suo Ducato dell'anno 1629, fino all'anno 1632* (Milano: Ghisolfi, 1648), 24.

some places, it was the normal effect of the autumnal emissions from the marshes; and in others, a result of the poverty and hardship caused by the passage of the German troops. This reassurance was conveyed to the tribunal, and seemed to set its mind at ease.

However, as more and more reports of death arrived from other areas, without pause, two delegates were once again dispatched to view and review the situation: the aforementioned Tadino and an auditor from the tribunal. By the time they arrived, the disease was already so widespread that there was no need to search for proof. They visited the province of Lecco, the Valsassina, the shores of Lake Como, and the districts of Monte di Brianza and Gera d'Adda. Everywhere they went they found towns whose gates were closed, blocking entry, and others that were almost deserted, since the townsfolk had fled and were camped out in the fields or had deserted the area completely. "The people looked," wrote Tadino, "like so many wild creatures, holding sprigs of mint, ruta, or rosemary, or a cruet of vinegar." They inquired about the death toll. The answers were shocking. They visited the sick and the dead, and everywhere found the ugly, terrifying marks of the plague. They conveyed the bad news to the Tribunal of Health in a letter. Upon receiving it, on the thirtieth of October, the tribunal "issued the order"—according to Tadino—to send out a bulletin banning people from the towns where the contagion had appeared from entering Milan. "While the decree was being drafted," a few hasty advance instructions were given to the sentries at the gates.

In the meantime, the two delegates quickly took all the steps they thought necessary, but they returned to the city with the grim certainty that these measures would not suffice to redress and stop the course of a disease that was already so advanced and widespread.

Having arrived on the fourteenth of November, and delivered both oral and written reports to the tribunal, they were then deputized to appear before the Governor and explain the situation to him. So they went. And they reported back: He was exceedingly sorry to hear the news, and made a great display of emotion, but

concerns about the war were far more urgent: *sed belli graviores esse curas.* This we know from Ripamonti, who combed through the records of the Tribunal of Health and also spoke with Tadino, who had been assigned this special mission. This was the second time the latter had been dispatched, the reader will recall, for the same purpose, and obtaining the same result. Two or three days later, on the eighteenth of November, the Governor, oblivious or heedless of the danger of such a gathering in these circumstances, issued a decree in which he ordered public festivities to be held for the birth of Prince Carlos, the first son of King Philip IV. He specified that everything was to proceed according to custom, as if no health warnings had been issued.

He being, as I have already mentioned, the famous Ambrogio Spinola, who had been sent to set the war campaign on the proper footing, correct the mistakes of Don Gonzalo, and, incidentally, to govern. And here we should also recall, incidentally, that he would die a few months later, in the same war so dear to his heart. He died not of wounds suffered on the battlefield but in bed, of anxiety and grief, caused by the criticism, injustice, and unpleasantness of every sort that he had received from those whom he had served. History has deplored his fate and condemned their ingratitude, while diligently listing his military and political achievements and praising his foresight, actions, and perseverance. It might have also considered how he deployed all these qualities when the plague threatened and then invaded a people entrusted to his care, or rather, to his mercy.

Without oppugning that criticism, any surprise at his behavior is diminished, however, by the even greater surprise at the behavior of the people, by which I mean the people who were still untouched by the contagion, and had every reason to fear it. Wouldn't you think that the news of towns that had been so badly hit, towns that almost ring the city, no farther than eighteen or twenty miles away in places, would spark a general outcry, a desire for precautions (good or bad), or at least a sterile unease? Yet if there is one thing on which contemporary accounts agree, it is in attesting that noth-

ing of the sort occurred. The famine of the previous year, the abuses of the soldiers, and the afflictions of the spirit were considered a more than sufficient explanation for the mortality rate. In the public squares, in the workplace, or at home, anyone who dared to hint at the danger, and who attributed the deaths to the plague, was treated to angry contempt and jeers of disbelief. The same disbelief, or rather the same blindness and obstinacy, prevailed in the Senate, in the Council of the Decurioni, and in every magistrate.

As soon as the first cases of the contagious disease appeared, Cardinal Federigo, according to my research, sent a pastoral letter to the priests with strict instructions to warn the people again and again to take these cases seriously and to report any potential incidents, as well as to turn in any infected or suspicious clothing.* This is yet another of the Cardinal's unique and commendable qualities.

The Tribunal of Health requested, even pleaded, for cooperation, but it received little to none. Even within the tribunal itself, attention to the epidemic fell far short of the urgent need. As Tadino points out repeatedly, and the full context of his report makes clear, it was the two physicians, convinced of the gravity and imminence of the danger, who prodded the tribunal to action, which in turn reluctantly prodded the other government bodies.

We have already seen how, at the first reports of the plague, the tribunal was slow to take action, or even to gather information. Adding significantly to the delay, perhaps because of obstruction by senior magistrates, the decree to restrict entry into the city, which had been agreed to on the thirtieth of October, was not drafted until the twenty-third of the following month, and not published until the twenty-ninth, by which time the plague had already entered Milan.

Tadino and Ripamonti wanted to record the name of the man who had introduced the contagion to the city, as well as more details about him and his case. In observations of the beginnings of a

* Franceso Rivola, *Vita di Federico Borromeo* (Milano: Pier Donisio Gariboldi, 1656), 582.

vast mortality, in which the victims cannot be identified by name but only vaguely indicated by their numbers in the thousands, there is often a strange curiosity to record and conserve the names of the first few carriers, as if the distinction of being the first to die in an extermination lends a fatal and memorable quality to names and otherwise quite ordinary details.

Both historians agree that it was an Italian soldier in the service of Spain. Apart from that, there is little they agree on, including his name. According to Tadino, it was Pietro Antonio Lovato, garrisoned in the Lecco territory. According to Ripamonti, it was Pier Paolo Locati, quartered in Chiavenna. They also disagree as to when he entered Milan: Tadino places it at the twenty-second of October, Ripamonti on the same day of the following month. Neither is correct, since both are contradicted by other well-documented sources. Ripamonti, writing by order of the General Council of the Decurioni, must have had many means at his disposal to obtain the necessary information. And Tadino, by virtue of his position, should have been better informed than anyone. Nevertheless, after comparing other, more accurate dates, it appears that the soldier entered Milan before publication of the decree restricting access to the city. And if you wanted to go to the trouble, you could prove, or almost, that it must have been at the beginning of that month. But the reader will, of course, exempt me from this task.

Whatever the case may be, this unfortunate foot soldier and bearer of misfortune, carrying a big bundle of clothing bought or stolen from German soldiers, stopped by the house of relatives in the Porta Orientale neighborhood, not far from the Capuchin monastery. The moment he arrived, he fell ill and was taken to the hospital, where a dark swollen lump, a bubo, was found under his armpit, leading his attendant to suspect the true cause. Four days later he died. The Tribunal of Health ordered the isolation and quarantine of his relatives in their home. His clothing and hospital bed were burned. In a matter of days, two servants and a good friar who had cared for him also fell ill, all three from the plague. In the

hospital, concerns about the nature of his illness were raised immediately, and precautions were taken as a result, preventing the contagion from spreading any further inside.

But the soldier had sown a seed in his trail that did not take long to germinate. The first to be infected was the landlord of the house where he had lodged, a certain Carlo Colonna, lute player. Therefore, on the orders of the Tribunal of Health, all the other tenants of the house were taken to the lazaretto, where most of them fell ill, and some died shortly thereafter of what was clearly the plague.

By then the contagion had already spread throughout the city, since neighbors, relatives, and servants had salvaged the tenants' clothing and furniture despite the search and burn instructions of the tribunal. There were also new arrivals to the city, thanks to loopholes, lax application, and deft evasion of the decrees. So the plague continued to fester, creeping through the rest of the year and into the early months of 1630. Every so often, in this neighborhood or that, someone would catch and someone would die from the disease. There were still so few cases that any suspicions of the truth were banished, while the public's dumb and deadly confidence that there was not nor had there ever been a plague was reconfirmed. Many doctors, echoing the *vox populi* (or was it, even in this case, the voice of God?), derided the evil auguries and dire warnings of the few. They trotted out the names of common illnesses to explain away every case of plague they were called upon to treat, regardless of the signs or symptoms.

Even when reports of these incidents reached the Tribunal of Health, they always arrived late, for the most part, and uncertain. Fear of quarantine and of the lazaretto made everyone wary: The ill were not reported, the gravediggers and their supervisors were bribed, and even employees of the tribunal assigned to examine the cadavers could be paid off to issue false death certificates.

When the tribunal did manage to discover a victim, it ordered possessions burned, homes sequestered, and families sent to the lazaretto, so it was easy to understand the general anger and com-

plaints, "from the Nobles, the Merchants, and the common people," according to Tadino, who were convinced that these actions amounted to senseless and baseless harassment. The brunt of the resentment fell on the two doctors—Tadino and Senatore Settala (son of the chief medical officer)—who could not cross a public square without having obscenities or even stones hurled after them. For a few months, they found themselves in a unique and memorable situation: witnessing the advance of a horrible scourge, striving in every manner to prevent it, and running into obstacles where they were looking for help, all the while being called enemies of the patria: "*pro patriae hostibus*," as Ripamonti wrote.

Some of that resentment was also directed at other doctors, who were likewise convinced that the contagion was real, and tried to convey their terrible certainty by suggesting precautions. Even the most moderate were accused of being credulous and obstinate: all the others, of telling blatant lies, and concocting a plot in order to profit from public fear.

The chief medical officer at the time was, as I said, Lodovico Settala, a former Professor of Medicine at the University of Pavia, and later of Moral Philosophy in Milan, author of many works that were highly regarded in those days. He was known for being offered chairs at other universities—Ingolstadt, Pisa, Bologna, Padua—and turning them all down. He was nearly eighty years old, but remained one of the most authoritative men of his time. In addition to his reputation as a scientist, he was esteemed as a man, and admired and loved for his charity in treating and helping the poor. To my regret and sorrow, however, the esteem inspired by these qualities is compromised by the very thing that in those days must have earned him greater and more widespread admiration, for the poor man shared some of the most common and deadly prejudices of his contemporaries. He was ahead of his time but didn't want to break with the common consensus, an invitation for trouble that can often make a man lose the authority he had earned in other areas. Yet in this case, even his great authority was not enough to sway the opin-

ion of those whom poets call *profanum vulgus*, profane commoners, and whom actors call their beloved public. Nor could it shield him from the animosity and the insults of those members of the public who leap more easily from judgments to demonstrations to action.

One day, on his way to visit patients, a crowd started to gather around his sedan chair, shouting that he was responsible for the rumors about the plague. With his scowl and scraggly beard, he had terrorized the city, they said, all to create business for the doctors! As the crowd grew, so did its fury. Seeing the situation take a turn for the worse, the sedan chair–bearers found shelter for their master at the home of friends, who luckily lived nearby. Such was Settala's reward for predicting the plague, identifying it, and wanting to save thousands of people from its ravages. He would eventually win back the public's favor as a wise and—so unbearable to imagine—charitable man when, in a deplorable consultation, he participated in the torture of a poor hapless wretch, who was burnt at the stake after her flesh had been torn with red-hot tongs. She had been accused of witchcraft after her current master suffered strange stomach pains, while a previous master had fallen madly in love with her.*

Toward the end of March, the number of illnesses and deaths started to mount, first in the Porta Orientale area, then in every neighborhood of the city. There were strange cases of spasms, palpitations, lethargy, and delirium, together with the fatal mark of bruises and dark swollen lumps known as buboes. For the most part, the deaths were quick, violent, and often quite sudden, without any prior symptoms. The doctors who had rejected the diagnosis of the plague, unwilling to admit now what they had derided earlier, still felt obliged to give a generic moniker to the new disease, which had now become too widespread and too obvious to remain nameless. So they came up with the term *malignant* or *pestilential* fevers: a miserable compromise, indeed a bit of word play that caused terrible harm, for while seemingly acknowledging the illness it still man-

* Count Pietro Verri, *Storia di Milano*, vol. 4 (Milano: Gli Editori, 1825), 155.

aged to hide the truth: that the infection was being spread through human contact.

Like someone waking up from a deep sleep, the magistrates began to pay closer attention to the warnings and proposals of the Tribunal of Health, and enforce its decrees and sequestering, and quarantine orders. The tribunal was constantly requesting money to meet the growing daily expenses of the lazaretto and many other services. And it made these requests to the Decurioni, while awaiting a decision on whether the expenses should be borne by the City or the Crown (a decision that I believe was never made, except in practice). The Grand Chancellor submitted another petition to the Decurioni on the orders of the Governor, who was once again laying siege to the poor town of Casale. The Senate sent an appeal for action on two items: to provision the city with food before the contagion got even worse and stop commerce with other cities; and to support the large percentage of the population who had lost their jobs. The Decurioni tried to raise the money through loans and taxes. They distributed a little of their collection to the Tribunal of Health, a little to the poor, and a little to buy some grain, which met part of the need. But greater hardship was yet to come.

In the lazaretto, although more and more people died every day, the number of inmates continued to grow. It was an arduous job to provide service and discipline, keep the sexes segregated as prescribed, and maintain or rather enforce the guidelines ordered by the Tribunal of Health. There was great confusion from the start, due to the unruliness of many inmates as well as the negligence and corruption of the attendants. Not knowing where to turn, the tribunal and the Decurioni decided to approach the Capuchins. They begged the Father Commissioner of the Province, who was acting for the recently deceased Provincial Father, to provide them with men who could govern that desolate realm. He proposed that they hire, as the director, Padre Felice Casati, a mature man renowned for his charity, energy, strength of character, and mild manner (future events would prove this reputation well deserved); and as his partner and assistant, Padre Michele Pozzobonelli, who, while still

young, was as grave and severe in his thoughts as he was in demeanor. The proposal was accepted with great pleasure, and on the thirtieth of March, the two men entered the lazaretto.

The President of the Tribunal of Health showed them around, to hand over command of the lazaretto to them. After summoning the attendants and employees of every rank, he announced that Padre Felice would be the new director, with primary and plenary authority. As the wretched assembly steadily grew, other Capuchins joined the staff. They became supervisors, confessors, administrators, nurses, cooks, clothing distributors, washermen, and whatever else was required.

Always solicitous, even under pressure, Padre Felice made the rounds every day and night, crossing the porticos, the rooms, and the vast inner yard, sometimes holding a staff, sometimes armed only with a hair shirt. He activated and controlled everything, putting down uprisings, settling quarrels, threatening, punishing, scolding, comforting, and drying tears as well as shedding some of his own. He caught the plague early on, recovered, and resumed his duties with renewed energy. Most of his brothers lost their lives, but all of them did so joyfully.

Such a dictatorship was certainly a strange remedy, as strange as the calamity, as the times. If this were all we knew, there would be no better proof, indeed no better example of a primitive and badly ruled society than the fact that its leaders did not know what to do with this major responsibility other than to delegate it, and whom to delegate it to other than to those who, by their vocation, were most alien to such authority. But the brothers' adept assumption of this responsibility is a noble example of the force and ability that charity can grant in every era and in every situation. There was beauty in their very acceptance of this assignment, for no other reason than that no one else would, and for no other purpose than to serve, with no other hope in this world than to die a death more enviable than envied. And there was beauty in offering them this responsibility only because it was difficult and dangerous, and they were presumed to have the vigor and composure that was so needed

and so rare in those times. This is why the labors and the hearts of those brothers deserve to be remembered with the admiration, tenderness, and special gratitude owed to them, in solidarity, for the great services rendered to their fellow man, and owed especially to those who provided it for no compensation.

"If these Padri had not been there," writes Tadino, "the whole city would surely have been annihilated, since it was miraculous for them to have done so much for the public benefit in so little time; with no help, or only very little, from the City. Through their industry and prudence, they cared for thousands of the poor in the lazaretto." During the seven months that Padre Felice was in charge, about fifty thousand people were admitted, according to Ripamonti, who rightly says that he would have mentioned the padre even if he had been writing about the glories of the city rather than its miseries.

The public's stubborn denial of the plague was also fading naturally and dispersing gradually as the disease spread, and spread through contact and mingling with the infected: Especially after the disease, having been confined to the poor for a time, started to infect more prominent citizens. The most noted among them, and thus deserving of special mention here, was the chief medical officer, Settala. Was the public finally ready to admit that the poor old man had been right? We'll never know. He, his wife, two children, and seven servants fell ill of the plague. Only he and one of his children survived. The rest all died. "Such cases," writes Tadino, "occurring as they did in the city, in Noble houses, made both the Nobility and the common people more disposed to reflect, and skeptical doctors, as well as reckless, ignorant common people, began to shut their mouths, grit their teeth, and raise their eyebrows."

But sometimes the results, remedies, and vendettas, so to speak, of entrenched convictions are worse than staying the course, undeterred, against all reason and evidence. And this was one of those times. The people who had long and resolutely refused to believe that an evil seed within their midst had the ability, through natural

means, to propagate and cause a massacre could no longer deny its spread. But they did not want to admit that it was airborne (which would have meant admitting both their great lie and their great guilt). They were more inclined to seek another cause, and to accept anything that was proposed. Unfortunately, they found one ready and available in the ideas and traditions common to the period, not only in Italy but throughout Europe: namely, the dark arts, diabolic rituals, and plots to spread the plague through contagious poisons and black magic. The same or similar assumptions and beliefs had arisen in many previous pestilences, especially in Milan, during the plague half a century earlier.

The previous year, King Philip IV of Spain had signed and sent a dispatch to the Governor of Milan, warning him that four Frenchmen had escaped from Madrid and were wanted on suspicion of spreading poisonous, pestilential unguents: He should be on alert in case they appeared in Milan. The Governor conveyed the message to the Senate and the Tribunal of Health, which did not seem to have paid it much mind until then. But after the plague had broken out and been acknowledged, however, recollections of that warning helped to confirm or even create the vague suspicion of a malicious plot.

Then, two events, one driven by blind unchecked fear, and the other by an inexplicable act of mischief, converted vague suspicion of a possible attack into the suspicion, and for many the certainty, that there had really been an attack, and an actual conspiracy.

On the evening of the seventeenth of May, some people were convinced that they had seen individuals in the Duomo dabbing unguent on a wooden screen that divided the men's section of the church from the women's. They demanded that the screen be removed from the church that night, along with a number of pews that surrounded it. The President of the Tribunal of Health rushed over with four other people from his office. After inspecting the screen, the pews, and the holy water fonts, he found nothing to confirm the ignorant suspicion of foul play. Nevertheless, to humor

the people, and *out of an abundance of caution rather than necessity,* he decided that it would suffice to wash the screen. The sheer size of that screen made a terrifying impression on the crowd, for whom an object easily became evidence. It was rumored and generally believed that all the pews, walls, and even the church bell ropes inside the Duomo had been smeared with an unguent. Nor was it said only on that occasion.

All the contemporary memoirs that report the event (some written many years later) describe it with equal certainty. We might never have known the truth about what really happened, were it not for a letter from the Tribunal of Health to the Governor, which I found in the San Fedele archives, whose words I have quoted in italics.

The next morning, a new and stranger, more significant sight greeted the eyes and minds of the citizens. In every part of the city, the doors of the houses and the walls had been smeared for long stretches with an unidentifiable filth, yellowish and chalky, that looked as if it had been applied with a sponge. Either it was a foolish prank to provoke greater and more widespread fear, a criminal design to increase public confusion, or something else even I can't imagine. There were enough eyewitnesses that I think it more reasonable to attribute this occurrence to the action of the few rather than to the hallucination of the many. It would not be the first or last act of this kind.

On the topic of poisonous unguents, Ripamonti often derides and more often deplores the credulousness of the people, but he affirms that he, too, saw the splatters: "We, went to see, as well. Here and there were uneven splotches, as if someone with a sponge dipped into a purulent substance had smeared the walls. Here and there you could glimpse stains on the doors and steps, too" (75).

In the aforementioned letter, the gentlemen of the Tribunal of Health describe the event in the same terms. They inspected the substance and tested it on dogs, with no negative effects. In their opinion, *such temerity proceeds from insolence rather than any evil intent,*

which suggests that they still had the composure not to see what was not there. In describing the event, other contemporary accounts imply that at first, many were of the opinion that it was a perverse prank. None of them mention anyone who denied this (as they certainly would have in the event that someone had—if only to call them bizarre).

I thought that it would not be inappropriate to compile and report details of this notorious collective delirium, some of which are little known, and some of which are not known at all. Because in the mistakes and especially in the mistakes of many, I find that the most interesting and useful thing to observe is precisely the path they took, their appearances, and the ways in which they entered into and took over minds.

The already agitated city was in an uproar. Homeowners burned stumps of straw and charred the splattered areas. Passersby stopped and observed, shuddering in horror. Foreigners, easily identified by their unusual dress, were suspected simply because they were foreign, and subjected to citizen's arrests on the streets and taken to the police. Examinations and interrogations were conducted of the people arrested, the ones who arrested them, as well as the witnesses. No one was found guilty. Better minds were still capable of doubting, questioning, and understanding.

The Tribunal of Health published a decree promising rewards and immunity to anyone who reported the perpetrator or perpetrators of the deed. *Nevertheless, we do not deem it appropriate,* the gentlemen say in the aforementioned letter, dated the twenty-first of May, but evidently written on the nineteenth, the day indicated in the printed decree, *that this crime remain unpunished in any manner, especially in such a dangerous and suspicious time. We have published this decree today, for the consolation and peace of mind of this Population, and to obtain evidence of the deed, etc.* In the decree itself, however, there was no hint, or at least no clear one, of the reasonable and reassuring conjecture shared with the Governor: an omission that manifested both the mad obsessions of the people, and the tribunal's complacency, as reprehensible as it was pernicious.

While the tribunal was seeking, much of the public, as is often the case, had already found. Some believed it was a poisonous unguent. Some thought it was Don Gonzalo Fernández de Córdoba's revenge for the insults he had received on his departure. Some thought it was a trick by Cardinal Richelieu to depopulate Milan and take possession of it without a struggle. Still others, who knows why, thought the perpetrator was the Count of Collato, or Wallenstein, or one Milanese gentleman or another. And there was no shortage, as I have said, of those who saw this event as nothing more than a foolish prank, which they attributed to students, noblemen, or army officials who had grown bored with the siege of Casale.

When the much-feared infection and widespread death toll did not immediately occur, the early panic subsided momentarily, and the matter was or appeared to be consigned to oblivion.

A number of people were still not convinced that there really was a plague. And since some victims in both the lazaretto and the city had actually recovered, "it was said by the common people, and also by many biased doctors, that it was not a true plague, because otherwise everyone would have been dead" (Tadino, 93). It is always strange to hear the final arguments of an opinion eventually defeated by overwhelming evidence.

To erase all doubts, the Tribunal of Health found a solution befitting the need, a way to speak to eyes, as the times seemed to demand or suggest. At one of the Pentecostal feasts, the citizens would customarily gather at the San Gregorio cemetery, outside the Porta Orientale, to pray for the victims of the previous plague buried there. Excited by this opportunity for pomp and diversion, everyone had turned out in festive clothing. On that same day, an entire family had died from the plague. At the busiest hour of the Pentecostal feast, with many people milling about in carriages, on horseback, or on foot, the bodies of that family were transported to the cemetery on a cart, naked, by order of the tribunal, so the crowd could see for itself the undeniable signs of the plague. Wherever the cart passed, cries of revulsion and terror would break out. A long murmur followed in its wake. Another murmur preceded it.

Who could deny the plague now? It was gaining more believers on its own every day, but this event played no small role in persuading them.

So at the beginning, no plague, absolutely not, by any count: The very utterance of the word was prohibited. Then came the "pestilential" fevers, admitting the idea indirectly, through an adjective. And then, not an actual plague, well, yes, there was a plague, but only in a sense. Not a proper plague, mind you, but something for which there was no other name. Finally, it was a plague without a doubt and without dissent. But another idea had already taken root, the idea of poison and sorcery, which distorted and confused the idea expressed in a word that could no longer be retracted.

You do not need to be well versed in the history of ideas and of words, I believe, to realize that many words have followed a similar course. Thank heavens that so few are of this nature and importance, pay such a high price before they are believed, and are associated with such attributes.

Most of this long and twisted course could have been avoided, however, in both lesser and greater affairs, if the tried and true methods of observing, listening, comparing, and thinking before speaking had been adopted.

But speech, by itself, is so much easier than all the rest put together that we, too—by which I mean we humans in general—deserve a measure of indulgence.

Chapter 32

As it grew more and more difficult to address the dire needs created by the situation, the Council of the Decurioni resolved, on the fourth of May, to appeal to the Governor for help. On the twenty-second, two of its members were sent to the army camp below Casale to report the straits and troubles of the city: the enormous expenses, the empty coffers, the future years' revenue already committed, and the current taxes unpaid, due to the widespread misery whose many causes included, primarily, the squandering of resources on the army. They were to request that the Royal Treasury bear the costs of the plague, as mandated by law and unbroken custom, and by special decree of Emperor Charles V. During the plague of 1576, the Governor of Milan, the Marquis of Ayamonte, had not only suspended all government taxes, but he had also given the city a subsidy of forty thousand scudi from the treasury. The Council requested four things in particular: the suspension of taxes, as per the previous outbreak; financing from the treasury; a dispatch from the Governor to the King detailing the misery in the city and in the province; and a halt to any new military garrisons, since the area was already devastated by the existing ones. In response, the Governor sent his condolences along with words of encouragement: He regretted that he could not be in the city to help with the relief effort, but hoped, nonetheless, that the zeal of the council would compensate for everything, because now was the time to spend unstintingly, and to make every possible effort. As to their requests, *proueeré en el mejor modo que el tiempo y necesidades presentes permitieren*—I shall do my best to see to them as the current time and needs allow. At the bottom of his letter was a

scribble standing in for his name, Ambrogio Spinola, the signature every bit as clear as his promises. Grand Chancellor Ferrer responded that the council had read the Governor's missive *con gran desconsuleo*—with heavy hearts. Other delegations went back and forth, with more questions and answers, but I have found no evidence that less ambiguous conclusions were reached.

Some time later, at the height of the plague, the Governor sent an official letter to Ferrer, deputizing him to take charge of the outbreak, since he himself, as he wrote, was too occupied with the war: a war that, by the way, after at least one million people had died from the plague (not counting the soldiers), throughout northern Italy, from Lombardy to the Venetian territories, Piedmont, Tuscany, and part of Romagna; and after the taking and barbaric sack of Mantua, had ended with everyone recognizing Nevers as the new Duke of Mantua, when the whole purpose of the war had been to keep him out of Italy. Nevers was obliged, however, to cede to the Duke of Savoy a part of Montferrat (which provided a measly income of fifteen thousand scudi), and to the Duke of Guastalla, Ferrante, other lands (for an income of six thousand scudi); not to mention a separate confidential pact, by which the Duke of Savoy ceded Pinerolo to France, in a treaty that was executed sometime later, under other pretexts, and through deception.

The Decurioni also adopted another resolution: to ask the Cardinal-Archbishop for a solemn procession through the city of the body of San Carlo, who had administered heroically to the needs of the people during the previous plague.

The good prelate refused, for several reasons. He disliked this trust in an arbitrary measure, and feared that, if it failed to produce results (which he also feared), then that trust would give way to rioting.* Moreover, he feared that, *if these anointers really did exist,* the

* *Memoria delle cose notabili successe in Milano intorno al mal contaggioso l'anno 1630,* collected by Don Pio la Croce (Milano: Giuseppe Maganza, 1730). This book was clearly based on an unpublished manuscript by an author who lived at the time of the plague—if it is not a simple printing rather than a new compilation.

procession would be an occasion all too fitting for the crime. And *if they did not,* the congregation of so many people would only serve to further spread the epidemic: *a much more real danger* ("Si unguenta scelerata et unctores in urbe essent . . . Si non essent . . . Certiusque adeo malum" [Ripamonti, 185]). Because in the meantime, the underlying suspicion of unguents had been revived and was raging more widely and furiously than before.

Once again, the walls and doors of public buildings, as well as the doorways and door knockers of private homes had been seen, or this time supposedly seen, swabbed with an unguent. The news of these discoveries flew from mouth to mouth, and hearing about them had the same effect as seeing them, as often happens in times of high anxiety. People willingly embraced these rumors as they became more distressed by the disease's presence, and irritated by its stubborn threat. For anger is quick to punish, and as a wise man accurately observed, it would rather blame troubles on human misconduct, against which it can exact revenge, than recognize a cause against which it can only resign itself.*

A refined poison; instantaneous and highly penetrating: These words were used to explain the virulence of the disease, as well as its most obscure and disordered symptoms. The poison was said to be concocted from the worst of every foul and atrocious thing that wild and twisted imaginations could invent: toads, snakes, saliva, even the flesh of plague victims. Some said it was witchcraft, which caused every symptom, weakened every objection, and overcame every obstacle. If no symptoms appeared immediately after the first sighting of the unguents, the reason was clear: Amateur poisoners must have failed in their first attempt. But now the art had been perfected, and the perpetrators were hell-bent on carrying out their plan. Anyone who had argued that it was a prank, or denied the existence of a plot, was dismissed as blind or obstinate, or even suspected of trying to conceal

* The wise man to whom Manzoni refers is Pietro Verri (1728–1797), a leading Milanese intellectual, and reputedly his uncle. The citation is taken, loosely, from his pamphlet, *Osservazioni sulla tortura.*

the truth from the public, namely, that he himself was an accomplice, an *anointer.* That word soon became common, solemn, tremendous. The fervent belief in anointers made their discovery inevitable: All eyes were alert, any act could prove suspicious. And suspicion led easily to certainty, and certainty to fury.

Ripamonti sets forth two examples as proof, and advises the reader that he did not select them because they were the most atrocious examples of what had become a daily occurrence, but because he had unfortunately been an eyewitness to both.

At the Church of San Antonio, on some feast day or another, a man in his late eighties wanted to sit down after having prayed for a time on his knees, so he dusted off the pew with his cloak. "That old man is anointing the pews!" came the cry from some women who had witnessed his gesture. The other churchgoers jumped on top of him (in church, of all places!). They grabbed him by his white hair, and pummeled him with their fists and feet. They pushed and pulled him outside, and if they didn't finish him off there, it was only so they could haul him, half-dead, to the prison, to the judges, to the torture chambers. "I saw him while they were dragging him out like that," writes Ripamonti, "and I did not hear another word about what happened to him. I am quite sure he could not have survived more than a few more minutes."

The other case (on the following day) was equally strange but not equally fatal. Three young French friends, a writer, a painter, and a craftsman, were in Italy to study antiquities and seek opportunities to make money. They approached I don't know which external wall of the Duomo, and were observing it attentively. A man walking by saw them and stopped. He gestured to someone else, and others arrived on the scene. A crowd gathered to watch and keep an eye on them, since their clothing, hairstyles, and shoulder bags gave them away as foreigners, and what's worse, as Frenchmen. The young men reached out their hands to touch the wall, perhaps to verify if it was marble. That was all it took. They were surrounded, grabbed, beaten, and then pushed and shoved to the

prison. Luckily the courthouse was not far from the Duomo, and even more luckily, they were found innocent and released.

Nor did such things happen only in the city. Frenzy had propagated like the disease. The wayfarer who happened to encounter some peasants off the main road, and lingered to look around, or to lie down to rest; the stranger who seemed to have something odd, something suspicious in his face, in his clothing: They were both anointers. At the cry of "anointers," at the shout of a child, the drumbeat began and people came running. The hapless soul was either pelted with stones, or grabbed and hauled off to prison by the mob. This even happened to Ripamonti. And prison, at least, was a temporary safe haven.

But the Decurioni, undeterred by the wise Cardinal's refusal, and with the loud backing of public opinion, continued to pressure him to hold the procession. Federigo resisted for a while longer, trying to make them understand. This was as much wisdom as one man could muster against the forces of his times and the insistence of the majority, against public opinion, with its confused idea of danger, contradicted and unsupported by the evidence we know today. It was only a matter of time before his good arguments succumbed to the bad convictions of others. Whether or not a weak will played a part in his concession is a mystery of the human heart. Of course, if there is ever a case that the full blame can be put on the intellect, while the conscience is excused, it is when we are dealing with one of those (very) few men who seem to have resolutely obeyed their conscious, rather than their earthly interests, their whole life long. So after repeated urgings, the Cardinal finally gave in, not just to the procession, but also to the desires, and the demands, to display the casket holding the relics of San Carlo for eight days on the main altar of the Duomo.

I have found no evidence that the Tribunal of Health, or other government bodies, raised protests or objections of any kind. The tribunal merely ordered that a few precautions be taken that, while doing nothing to protect against the danger, did indicate its fears.

Stricter regulations on people entering the city were adopted and in order to guarantee that they were executed, the gates were kept closed. The doors of quarantined houses were nailed shut to keep the infected and the suspected away from the crowd as much as possible. If we can believe the word of one writer, not to mention a writer of that period, there were about five hundred such houses.*

Three days were spent in preparations. On the appointed date, the eleventh of June, the procession started out from the Duomo at dawn. A long line of people, mostly women, walked in front, their faces covered by large heavy veils. Many of them were barefoot and dressed in sackcloth. Next came the guilds, preceded by their flags, and the confraternities, in habits of various styles and colors. After them were the religious orders, then the lay priests, each wearing the insignia appropriate to his rank and holding a candle or torch. In the center, amid the brightness of many candles together and the loud sound of the singing, beneath an elaborate canopy, the crystal casket advanced, borne by four luxuriously dressed clergymen who rotated periodically. Through the crystal you could see the venerated body, dressed in splendid pontifical robes, with a miter on its skull. In its decayed and mutilated form, one could still make out vestiges of San Carlo's former appearance, as depicted in his portraits, and as he was remembered by those who had seen and revered him when he was alive. Behind the mortal remains of the late pastor (according to Ripamonti, our main source for this description), and close to him in merit, family, and rank, and on this day, also in person, came Archbishop Federigo. The rest of the clergy were next, followed by the magistrates in their most ceremonious garments. Then the nobility, some dressed in finery, as if for a solemn religious ceremony, while others were dressed in mourning, either barefoot or hooded, with masks pulled over their faces as a sign of penance. Everyone held procession candles. An assortment of common people brought up the tail end of the procession.

* *Alleggiamento dello Stato di Milano etc.* by C. G. Cavatio della Somaglia (Milano: G. B. & G. C. Malatesta, 1653), 482.

The entire route was decorated as if for a festival. The rich had laid out their most precious belongings. The façades of the more humble homes had been decorated by their wealthier neighbors or at public expense. Banners or leafy garlands were strung from the buildings. Everywhere one looked there were paintings, inscriptions, coats of arms. Vases, antiquities, and other rarities were put out for display on the windowsills. Illumination everywhere. Those who were quarantined watched the procession from their windows and followed it with their prayers. The side streets were silent and deserted, except for people who were listening, also from the windows, to the wandering buzz of the crowd. Others, including nuns, had climbed up to their roofs, hoping to catch a glimpse of the casket, of the procession, of anything at all, from a distance.

The procession passed through every neighborhood of the city. At each intersection, or rather little piazza—which in those days were called *carrobi* (only one remains today)—where the main roads fed into the neighborhoods, the procession would come to a stop, and they'd lay the casket at the foot of a cross. San Carlo had ordered these crosses—some of which are still standing today—placed at each intersection during the previous plague. In this manner the procession ended up back at the Duomo sometime after midday.

Lo and behold, while many believed confidently and with fanatical certainty that the procession would end the plague, the death toll went up the next day, in every social class and in every part of the city. It rose so suddenly and so steeply that no one could mistake the cause, or the occasion, for anything other than the procession itself.

But, oh, the incredible deadly power of a common prejudice! The assembly of so many people, and for so long, was not blamed. Nor was the infinite multiplication of casual contacts. The blame was laid squarely on the ease with which the anointers had been able to carry out their evil plan on a large scale. The rumor was that they had mingled with the crowd, infecting as many people as possible with their unguent. But that did not seem an adequate or ap-

propriate explanation for the death of so many people, across every social class. Apparently not even the eyes most keen on identifying suspicious behavior (and misinterpreting it) had caught a glimpse of unguent smears or stains of any kind on the walls or anywhere else. So to explain this turn of events, they had to fall back on the other venerable myth of poisonous malignant powders that the scientific community of Europe believed in those days. Rumor had it that these powders had been sprinkled along the streets and especially at the places where the procession stopped, thus sticking to the hems of clothing and to the bare feet of those who had walked in the crowd that day. "Hence on the same day of the procession, piety could be seen clashing with evil, perfidy with honesty, and loss with gain," according to one contemporary writer.* In truth, it was feeble human intellect clashing with its own delusions.

From that day, the fury of the contagion raged out of control. In no time hardly a single house was left untouched. In no time the population of the lazaretto, according to Somaglia, rose from two thousand to twelve thousand. According to almost everyone, it later reached as high as sixteen thousand. On the fourth of July, as I discovered in another letter from the Tribunal of Health to the Governor, the mortality rate exceeded more than five hundred people a day. According to the most common statistic, the plague claimed twelve or fifteen hundred lives a day at its peak, or, if we are to believe Tadino, more than thirty-five hundred. Tadino also states that, "Through the inquiries made after the plague," the population of Milan was found to have declined by more than 64,000 souls, where it had once exceeded 250,000. According to Ripamonti, the previous population had stood at only 200,000 and the death toll recorded by the vital statistics office was 140,000, apart from those who could not be counted. Other historians give higher or lower totals, but with little support for their claims.

Imagine the difficulty in which the Decurioni now found them-

* Agostino Lampugnano, *La pestilenza seguita in Milano, l'anno 1630* (Milano: Carlo Ferrandi, 1634), 44.

selves. It was their duty to provide for the public needs and to remedy whatever they could during such a disaster. Every day they had to replace and replenish the ranks of various types of civil servants: *monatti, apparitori,* and commissioners.

The monatti were responsible for the most difficult and dangerous jobs during the plague: removing the dead bodies from the homes, streets, and lazaretto; carting them away to the common grave and burying them; transporting or accompanying the sick to the lazaretto and taking charge of their care; and burning or disinfecting infected or suspicious items. Ripamonti claims that the name *monatto* is derived from the Greek *monos* (alone). In a description of the previous plague, Gaspare Bugatti says it came from the Latin *monere* (to admonish), though at the same time he wonders, more plausibly, whether it is actually a German word, since these men had been recruited mainly from Switzerland and the Grisons. So it would not be too far-fetched, in fact, to think it was a truncated form of the word *monatlich* (monthly), since they were hired on a month-to-month basis, given the uncertainty over how long the job might last.

The apparitori were assigned to walk ahead of the carts bearing the dead, ringing a bell to warn the pedestrians to keep their distance.

The commissioners were in charge of both, and reported directly to the Tribunal of Health.

The lazaretto needed to have doctors, surgeons, medicine, food, and all the equipment of an infirmary ready at all times. New lodgings had to be found and prepared for the afflicted arriving daily. Wood and straw huts were quickly erected in the yard of the lazaretto for this purpose. A new lazaretto, able to accommodate four thousand people, was built consisting entirely of huts, surrounded by a simple fence. Since this was still not enough, two more were commissioned, and construction began, but had to be canceled due to a shortage of every type of building material. Supplies, personnel, and energy diminished at the same pace as the need grew.

Not only was execution always lagging behind plans and orders;

not only were many sadly recognized needs barely provided for, even in the form of lip service; but such an extreme of impotence and despair was reached that many of the most piteous and urgent cases were not provided for at all. A great many infants whose mothers had died from the plague, for example, would themselves die from abandonment. The Tribunal of Health proposed that a shelter be established for orphans and destitute expectant mothers, since something had to be done for them, but nothing ever was. "One still had to pity, nevertheless," writes Tadino, "the Decurioni of the city, who were afflicted, harassed and mistreated by unruly and disrespectful soldiers; as well as, to a much lesser extent, by other parts of the unhappy Duchy, since neither help nor provisions were forthcoming from the Governor, who would only say that it was wartime, and the troops had to be well cared for" (117). That's how important it was considered to take Casale! Victory was held in the highest esteem, no matter the cause or purpose of the conflict.

At the same time, since the large but single ditch that had been dug near the lazaretto was filled to capacity with cadavers, growing numbers of bodies lay unburied in the lazaretto and throughout the city. The magistrates, after searching in vain for new laborers to do the grim task of moving the bodies, had to admit that they didn't know where else to turn. Who knows how it would have ended if exceptional relief did not arrive? In despair, the President of the Tribunal of Health, with tears in his eyes, appealed to the two good friars who were in charge of the lazaretto. Padre Michele promised he would help clear the city of bodies within four days, and what's more, within eight days he would dig enough new common graves not only to satisfy the present need, but also to handle the worst projections for the future. Along with a fellow friar and members of the tribunal offered by the President, he went outside the city to recruit peasants. He was able to enlist about two hundred men to dig three enormous ditches, thanks to the authority of the tribunal, as well as the authority of his habit and his words. He then sent the

monatti from the lazaretto to collect the dead, and thus fulfilled his promise by the agreed date.

At one point, the lazaretto was left without doctors. Some were rustled up, through offers of good pay and perquisites, but far fewer than needed, and only after difficulties and delays. Food supplies often ran so low that there were fears of death by starvation. More than once, when the necessary resources were nowhere to be found, generous donations arrived unexpectedly from anonymous parties just in time. So while many were in constant fear for their own well-being, numb and indifferent to the needs of others, there were still souls inclined to charity or whose charitable impulses were awakened by the loss of all earthly delights. Though many in charge of supervising and provisioning had died or departed, there were still men, healthy in body and steadfast in courage, who remained on the job. And there were still others, moved by pity, who took on and ably shouldered duties that were not theirs by profession.

Those most generous, ready, and constantly devoted to the difficult needs of this moment, however, were the clergy. At the lazarettos and in the city, their assistance never faltered. Wherever there was suffering, they were present. They could always be seen moving about and administering care to the sick and dying, even if they were sick and dying themselves. They brought relief not only to the spirit but also to the body, as best they could. They provided every service that the circumstances demanded of them. In the city alone, more than sixty priests died from the epidemic: about eight out of every nine.

As one would expect, Cardinal Federigo provided an encouraging example for all. After almost his entire household had died, relatives, senior magistrates, and the rulers of neighboring states begged him to escape from danger and seek refuge in the countryside. He rejected their advice and resisted their pressure in the same spirit with which he wrote to his priests: "Be prepared to shuffle off this mortal coil rather than forsake this family, these children, of ours: go forth to the plague with love in your heart, as you would

toward a reward, toward a life, so long as there is a single soul that can be won for Christ" (Ripamonti, 164). He followed precautions unless they interfered with his duties, and he instructed his fellow clergymen to do the same. At the same time, he ignored and did not seem to notice dangers he might face on his missions of mercy. He was forever praising and regulating the zeal of the clergy, to encourage those whose energy was flagging, and sending them to replace other priests who had died. He wanted the door to be kept open to anyone who needed him. He visited the lazarettos to console the sick and inspire their attendants. He rushed about the city, bringing relief to the poor souls quarantined in their homes, stopping by their doors and below their windows to hear their complaints and, in exchange, offering a few words of consolation and encouragement. He spared no efforts, in other words, and lived in the heart of the plague. And in the end, no one was more surprised than he to have come out of it unharmed.

In public catastrophes, and in long disruptions of the normal order, whatever it might be, there is always an increase, a sublimation of virtue. At the same time, however, there usually never fails to be a general increase in crime. And this, too, was plain to see. In the overall chaos and the collapse of law and order, scoundrels spared by and unafraid of the plague found new opportunities for criminal activity and new assurances of impunity. Indeed, responsibility for law and order fell into the hands of the very worst of them.

Work as monatti and apparitori was not generally suitable for anyone other than men whose love of theft and debauchery outweighed any innate revulsion or fear of infection. Their superiors, the commissioners, assigned jobs, prescribed strict rules, and meted out harsh penalties. Both the monatti and the commissioners served under magistrates and nobles delegated to every neighborhood, who were authorized to take summary action every time public order was needed. This system worked effectively for a while, but with commissioners dying by the day, abandoning the city, or losing their minds, almost no one was left to restrain the monatti, giv-

ing them virtually free rein. They entered homes as if they owned them, as enemies. They robbed and harassed the unfortunate plague victims who fell into their grips, and placed their vile, infectious hands on healthy children, parents, husbands, and wives, threatening to haul them off to the lazaretto unless they or someone else paid a ransom. Other times they would demand payment for their services, refusing to remove putrefying bodies unless they received a hefty sum. Tadino confirms (102) that the monatti and apparitori deliberately let infected clothing fall off the carts, in order to spread the plague and keep it going, since it had become a source of income, power, and revelry for them (though between the carelessness of some writers and the treachery of the monatti, it's hard to know who to believe). Some wretches pretended to be monatti by tying a bell around one ankle, the identification traditionally used to warn of their approach. They would enter houses and wreak havoc. Thieves would ransack empty houses, or the homes of the listless or dying, and plunder freely, while policemen would break into others and do the same, or worse.

As crime grew, so did madness. All the more or less prevailing distortions gained extraordinary power from the general distress and hysteria, with quicker and more widespread effects. On the whole they reinforced and heightened that special fear of unguents, a fear which, as we have seen, inspired a crime of a different sort. People were more obsessed and tormented by that imaginary peril than the real and present danger. As Ripamonti writes, "While the whole city was turned into a giant cemetery by the corpses scattered about or piled up, always before your eyes, always between your feet, there was something uglier, more deadly, in those furious recriminations, in those unhinged, monstrous suspicions . . . not only was the neighbor, the friend, the guest, to be distrusted, but even those names, those bonds of human charity—husband and wife, father and son, brother and brother—became words of terror. And—how awful and shameful to say!—the family meal, the nuptial bed—were feared as traps, as places that might conceal the pestilential venom."

The imaginary dimensions and bizarre nature of the alleged plot clouded all judgment and undermined the very foundations of mutual trust. At first people thought the supposed anointers were simply driven by ambition and greed. Then, they imagined, they believed, that these criminals took diabolical delight in spreading the plague, a temptation that overpowered their will. The ravings of the sick, accusing themselves of behavior they had feared from others, were treated as truth, and made it possible to believe anything about anyone. More convincing than their words were their actions, if delirious plague victims really did the things they imagined the anointers had done. This seems very likely and it helps explain both public opinion and many writers' claims. Thus, in the long grim period of the witch trials, the defendants' confessions (which were not always extorted) played no small part in promoting and supporting the prevailing opinion since, when an opinion prevails among too many and for too long, it ultimately expresses itself in every way, knocking on every door, attempting every method of persuasion. And it is hard for all or many to continue believing that something strange is being done without someone coming forward who believes he has done it.

Among the stories that the delirium about unguents led people to believe, there is one that deserves mention because of the credibility it gained and the circulation it enjoyed. The tale was told—though not everyone told it in exactly the same way (too singular a privilege for tall tales), but almost—that on a certain day, a certain man saw a six-horse carriage pull up to the Duomo. Inside, along with the other passengers, there was a grand personage with a dark and fiery face, blazing eyes, bristling hair, and menacing lips. As the man stood and stared, the carriage came to a halt and the coachman invited him to get in. The man did not dare to say no. After rambling through the city, the party descended from the carriage before a palace whereupon the man, on entering, discovered delights and horrors, deserts and gardens, caverns and halls. He came upon an assembly of seated ghosts in one room who showed him giant chests filled with money, and told him that he could take as much as

he liked, on the condition that he also accept a jar of the unguent, which he should spatter around the city. When he refused, in the blink of an eye he found himself back where his journey had begun.

This story—widely believed by the common people and, according to Ripamonti, insufficiently derided by men of influence—circulated throughout Italy and beyond.* In Germany it was even published. The Archbishop-Elector of Mainz wrote to Cardinal Federigo asking him if he should believe the amazing stories coming from Milan. The Cardinal replied that they were a hallucination.

The hallucinations of the learned were of equal value, if not of entirely equal nature, and equally damaging in their effects. Most of the learned believed that a comet which had appeared in the year 1628, as well as the alignment of Saturn and Jupiter, were evil omens and causes of the troubles. Tadino writes, "So clearly did the aforementioned conjunction influence the year 1630 that everyone could see it. *Mortales parat morbos, miranda videntur*—Prepare for deadly diseases, wondrous things will be seen." This prediction, taken, they said, from a book titled *Specchio degli almanacchi perfetti,* published in Turin in 1623, was on everyone's lips. Another comet, which appeared in June of the same year as the plague, was interpreted as yet another omen, or even, as clear proof of the unguents. The learned pored over books for examples of what they called "man-made" plague, and unfortunately they found many: They quoted from Livy, Tacitus, Cassius Dio, even Homer and Ovid, and the many other ancients who described similar occurrences. There was an even greater abundance of moderns. They quoted a hundred other authors who wrote scholarly treatises or spoke incidentally about poisons, sorcery, unguents, powders: Cesalpino, Cardano, Grevin, Salio, Paré, Schenck, Zacchia, and, finally, the deadly Delrio. If an author's fame were proportionate to the sum of good and evil caused by his works, Martin Delrio would be one of the most famous. For Delrio's writings cost the lives of more men

* Ripamonti, *"Apud prudentium plerosque, non sicuti debuerat irrisa," De Peste etc.*, 77.

than the feats of any conquistador. The same Delrio whose *Disquisitiones magicae* (a summary up to his own times of man's every delusion on the subject) had become the most indisputable authority, providing the justification and driving force behind incessant, horrific, and legal carnage for more than a century.

The learned borrowed whatever delusions of the common people suited their own ideas. And the commoners borrowed whatever they could understand, and as best as they could understand, from the hallucinations of the learned. And from the combination of the two, an enormous tangle of public insanity was formed.

Even more astonishing was the behavior of the doctors. I am referring to the doctors who had believed in the plague from the beginning. I am referring in particular to Tadino, who had warned of it, seen it arrive, and kept his eye, so to speak, on its progress. He had said and preached that it was the plague, that it was spread through human contact, and that the whole country would be infected unless protective measures were taken. But now, he, too, began to derive conclusive proof of poisonous, harmful unguents from these same symptoms. This is the same man who had remarked that delirium was a side effect of the disease after the second person in Milan, Carlo Colonna, died of the plague. It was shocking to see him cite the following incidents as proof of unguents and a diabolic plot: Two witnesses gave a deposition that people had come into their sick friend's room one night to show him the cure and offer him money if he was willing to anoint the houses in his neighborhood. When he refused, they vanished, and in their place was a wolf under the bed and three big cats on top, "which would remain there until daybreak" (123–124). If only one person had told this story, he would be considered eccentric, and not worth mentioning. But many and indeed almost everyone repeated it, turning this incident into a metaphor for the human spirit, and providing us with the opportunity to see how an orderly and reasonable series of ideas can be thrown into disarray by another series of ideas that crosses its path. Especially coming from a man like Tadino, one of the most reputable men of his time.

Two illustrious, much-admired writers claim that Cardinal Federigo doubted the existence of unguents.* We wish we could more fully praise his glorious and loving memory, and depict the good priest, here and in many other respects, as superior to most of his contemporaries. But we are forced to see even a mind as noble as his fall victim to the sway of public opinion. We have seen, at least in the pages of Ripamonti, that he truly was doubtful at first. Throughout the pestilence, he attributed much of this opinion to credulousness, ignorance, fear, and the desire to atone for taking so long to acknowledge the epidemic and take the necessary precautions. While he thought the rumors about these poisonous unguents were exaggerated, he came to believe that there was also an element of truth. Among the holdings of the Ambrosian Library, there is a short work about the plague, written in his hand, which alludes to his change of heart. In one passage he states it quite explicitly. "It was the common opinion," he writes, more or less, "that these unguents were mixed in various places, and that there were many different ways to spread them: some of which appear true, some fabricated." (His exact words were: "Unguenta uero haec aiebant componi conficique multifariam, fraudisque uias fuisse complures; quarum sane fraudum, et artium aliis quidem assentimur, alias uero fictas fuisse comentitiasque arbitramur.")†

There were still some, however, who believed right to the end of the plague, even to the end of their lives, that the unguents were pure fantasy. We know this not from them, since no one was brave enough to express in public an opinion that was so contrary to public opinion. We know it from writers who derided, criticized, or rejected the belief in unguents, saying that it was the prejudice of some, and though they did not dare openly dispute it, their objec-

* Lodovico Antonio Muratori, *Del governo della peste, e delle maniere di guardarsene, trattato di Lodovico Antonio Muratori* (Modena: Bartolomeo Soliani, 1714), 117; Verri, pamphlet cited.

† Federigo Borromeo, *De pestilentia quae Mediolani anno 1630 magnam stragem edidit* (unpublished manuscript), chapter 5.

tions still persisted. We also know it from people who had the story handed down to them. "I have come across people in Milan," writes the good Muratori in the aforementioned book, "who had received reliable reports from their ancestors and were not persuaded that these poisonous unguents existed." We can see that there was a clandestine outlet for the truth, a family secret: Good sense did indeed exist, but it stayed hidden for fear of common sense.

There were fewer magistrates every day. They were increasingly dismayed and confused, and dedicated what little resolve they could muster to hunting down the anointers. Among the documents of the plague in the San Fedele archive, there is a letter (with no attachments) in which the Grand Chancellor informs the Governor, in all seriousness and with great urgency, that he has received reports of poison being made in the country home of the brothers Girolamo and Giulio Monti, Milanese gentlemen. They were producing such large quantities that they had employed forty men *en este exercicio,* with the assistance of four horsemen from Brescia, who had the ingredients shipped from the Venetian Republic *para la fabrica del veneno.* He went on to say that, with the utmost secrecy, he had already made the necessary arrangements to send in the Mayor of Milan and the Auditor of the Tribunal of Health with thirty cavalrymen. But unfortunately one of the brothers had been tipped off in time to escape with the evidence of the crime—probably by his friend the Auditor, who invented excuses to delay the expedition. Nevertheless the Mayor departed with the soldiers to *reconocer la casa, y a ver si hallará algunos vestigios* (search the house and see if they couldn't find some traces), collect information, and arrest anyone who was implicated.

The whole affair must have come to nothing, since contemporary accounts of the suspicions hanging over the two gentlemen do not cite any proof. Unfortunately, on another occasion, the authorities were convinced that they did indeed have proof.

The trials that followed as a result were certainly not the first of their kind. Nor can they be considered a rarity in the history of jurisprudence. Leaving aside antiquity and limiting ourselves to a

period closer to the time we are examining, I can name Palermo, in 1526; Geneva, in 1530, then again in 1545, still later in 1574; Casale Monferrato, in 1536; Padua, in 1555; and Turin, in 1599 and again in 1630. In that same year, greater or smaller numbers of unhappy souls were put on trial and sentenced to the most atrocious tortures, convicted of having spread the plague with powders, unguents, sorcery, or a combination of all three. The most well known, and perhaps easiest to analyze, is the so-called unguents of Milan case, because the survival of detailed documentation from this period allows greater opportunities for analysis. Although a writer whom I have just praised also discussed this case, he was aiming not so much to record the history, as to use it in support of greater and more immediate study, so I felt this story could be material for a new work. But it is not a matter that can be settled in few words, and this is not the place to treat it at the length it deserves. Not to mention that the reader might not necessarily care to know the rest of our story after dwelling on these cases. So we will set aside this particular story and the analysis of these documents for another piece of writing, and finally return to our characters, whom we shall not abandon again until the end.*

* Manzoni is referring to *The History of the Column of Infamy,* an almost hundred-page account of the torture and execution of two barbers unjustly accused of spreading the plague. It was appended to the 1842 edition of his novel.

Chapter 33

One night toward the end of August, as the plague reached its peak, Don Rodrigo was making his way back to his home in Milan, accompanied by the faithful Griso, one of the three or four members of his household that had survived. He had been carousing with his drinking buddies, who liked to get together to while away the melancholy of those days. Every time they met there were always a few new faces more, and a few old faces less. That evening Don Rodrigo had been one of the jolliest of the bunch. He had kept the whole party in stitches with his jokes, including a mock eulogy for Count Attilio, who had been carried off by the plague two days earlier.

As he walked home, however, he felt an ache, à fatigue, a wobbling in his legs, a shortness of breath, and an inner burning that he wanted to blame on the wine, the late hour, the season. He didn't make a sound the whole way, and the first words out of his mouth, once he got home, were to order Griso to light the way to his bedroom. When they got there, Griso studied his master's face: It was distraught and feverish, his eyes glazed and bulging. During times like these, even beggars had to acquire, as they say, the eyesight of a physician, so Griso kept his distance.

"I'm fine, damn it," said Don Rodrigo, who could tell from Griso's manner what he was thinking, "never been better. But I might have had too much to drink. They had this wonderful Vernaccia! . . . A good night's sleep and I'll be good as new. I'm so tired . . . Can you get rid of that candle? The light is blinding me . . . it's bothering me!"

"The Vernaccia is playing tricks on you," said Griso, keeping his distance. "Go to bed now. A little sleep will do you good."

"Yes, you're right. That is, if I can sleep. Anyway, I'm fine. Put the bell near me, for good measure, in case I need something tonight. And listen closely in case I do ring. But I won't be needing anything . . . Will you get that damned lamp out of here!" he repeated, as Griso carried out his orders, getting only as close as necessary. "What the devil! It's unbearable!"

Griso took the candle and, wishing his master a good night, hurried out of the room while his master settled in.

But the blankets weighed on Don Rodrigo like a ton of bricks. He pushed them away and curled up to sleep, since he was dead tired. No sooner would he close his eyes, however, then he would wake up with a start, as if someone had shaken him as a prank. He could feel his temperature rising, and with it, his agitation. His thoughts ran to the month of August, to the wine, and to his overindulgence, on which he wanted to blame everything. But these ideas were immediately pushed aside by the thought that accompanied everything in those days, arriving from every direction, invading every drunken conversation, since it was easier to joke about than to ignore: the plague.

After much tossing and turning, he finally fell asleep. He then proceeded to have the worst, most unsettling dreams in the world. One dream followed the next, and he found himself high, high up, in the middle of a crowd in what looked like a big church. He had no idea how he had gotten there, or how the idea had even come to him, especially at a time like this. And it infuriated him. He looked at the people around him. They all had sallow, ravaged faces with a dazed, bewildered look in their eyes, and their mouths gaping. Their clothes hung from their bodies in tatters, and he could see bruises and buboes through the holes. "Keep your distance, you dogs!" he heard himself shouting, staring at the door, which was far, far away. He accompanied his shout with a threatening look. Rather than move away, he recoiled from their foul bodies, which were

brushing against him from every side. But none of those inanimate souls showed any sign of moving or of having heard him. Instead, they came even closer. One in particular seemed to be poking an elbow or something into his left side, between his heart and his armpit, giving him a sharp stabbing pain. When he turned to get away from it, he immediately felt something else stabbing him in the same place.

Incensed, he reached for his sword, which the mob had somehow pushed upward. Maybe the hilt was what was pressing against him. But when he went to grab it, he felt not the sword but an even sharper pain. He hollered, struggled to breathe, and wanted to shout even louder when suddenly all those faces seemed to turn in the same direction. He followed their gazes. He spied a pulpit, and something smooth, round, and shiny slowly emerged from above the railing, becoming more and more distinct: a bald head, then two eyes, a face, a long white beard; a friar standing erect, rising waist-high above the railing. It was Padre Cristoforo. After glaring at the assembled congregation, he seemed to stare straight at Don Rodrigo, raising his hand in the same gesture he had made in the great hall of the nobleman's palace.

Don Rodrigo responded by raising his own hand in anger, and made as if to lunge at and grab Padre Cristoforo's outstretched arm. A voice muttering silently in his throat broke into a loud shout, which woke him up. He lowered the arm he had raised in his sleep. He struggled to collect himself and open his eyes, since the late morning sun irritated him as much as the candlelight from the night before. He recognized his bed and his room, and realized it had all been a dream. The church, the people, the friar—all had vanished. All except for one thing: the pain in his left side. In that same moment, he felt a violent, labored palpitation of the heart, a buzzing, a constant whistling in his ears, a burning inside, and a heaviness in his limbs, worse than when he had turned in for the night. He hesitated for a moment or two before daring to examine the spot that was hurting. When he finally found it, he took an anxious look. And there it was: a filthy swollen purple bubo.

He knew he was lost. He was overcome by terror, and perhaps by the even greater terror that he would fall into the grips of the monatti, and be carted off and tossed into the lazaretto. As he searched for a way to avoid this ghastly fate, he could feel his thoughts clouding over, darkening. He could feel the moment approaching when the only thought left would be succumbing to despair. He grabbed the bell and shook it violently. Griso, who had been on the alert, appeared immediately. He stopped a certain distance from the bed. He gave a wary glance at his master and knew that his suspicions on the night before had been correct.

"Griso!" cried Don Rodrigo, struggling to sit up. "You have always been so loyal."

"Yes, sir."

"I've always been good to you."

"Out of the goodness of your heart."

"You are the one person I can trust."

"That I am."

"I'm sick, Griso."

"I noticed."

"If I recover, I'll be even better to you than I was in the past."

Griso gave no answer, and stood there waiting to see where this preamble might lead.

"I don't trust anyone but you," Don Rodrigo continued. "Can you do me a favor, Griso?"

"At your command," the man answered, with the usual formulaic response to this unusual request.

"Do you know where the surgeon Chiodo lives?"

"Of course I do."

"He's a good man who will keep an illness secret, for a price. Go and summon him. Tell him I'll pay him four—no six—scudi to visit, or more, if he asks for more. But he has to come immediately. And in such a way that no one notices."

"Good idea," said Griso, "I'll go and be right back."

"Listen, Griso. Get me a little water first? I'm burning up. I can't stand it anymore."

"No, sir," replied Griso, "not without the doctor's orders. These are strange illnesses. There's no time to waste. Keep still. I'll be here with Chiodo in two shakes of a lamb's tail."

Then he left, closing the door behind him.

Sinking back beneath his blankets, Don Rodrigo imagined himself accompanying Griso to Chiodo's home. He counted his footsteps, calculating the time. Every so often he took another look at the bubo but immediately turned away in disgust. As more time passed, he listened carefully to hear whether the surgeon was arriving. The effort it took to concentrate suspended his feeling of sickness and kept his wits sharp. Suddenly, he heard a tinkling in the distance, but it seemed to be coming from the next rooms, not the street. He listened more carefully. It got louder and steadier, accompanied by a shuffling of feet. A horrible suspicion crossed his mind. He sat up and paid even closer attention. He heard a thud in the next room, like a weight being set down carefully. He thrust his legs out of the bed and tried to get up. As he stared at the door, it opened, and two sinister faces in filthy tattered red robes walked toward him: It was the monatti! He could see Griso's face, half-hidden behind the door, spying on him.

"You dirty traitor! . . . Away from me, you dogs! Biondino! Carlotto! Help! Murder!" cried Don Rodrigo. He stuck a hand under his pillow, groping for his pistol. He managed to pull it out, but at his first cry the monatti had already rushed the bed. The quicker of the two was upon him before he could do anything. He yanked the pistol from Don Rodrigo's hand and tossed it away, then pushed him down on the bed and held him there.

"You rat! Damn the monatti! Damn the ministers of the tribunal! Damn the do-gooders!" Don Rodrigo cursed with rage and contempt.

"Hold him there till we take him away," said the monatto's accomplice as he walked toward the safe. Griso came in and started helping him pick the lock.

"You scoundrel!" cried Don Rodrigo, glaring from beneath the man who was holding him and attempting to slip out of his strong

arms. "Let me kill that ingrate," he told the monatti, "and then you can do whatever you want with me." He tried to call his other servants again with the little voice he had left. But it was useless, since the abominable Griso had given them the night off, with fake orders from the master himself, before going to the monatti with a proposal to join forces and divvy up the spoils.

"Be good, now, be good," said the lout who had pinned the hapless Rodrigo to his bed. Turning to face the two who were ransacking the room, he shouted, "Let's do this fair and square!"

"You, you," Don Rodrigo bellowed at Griso, who was busy breaking into the safe, digging out money and possessions, and dividing everything up. "You! And after everything . . . ! You hellhound! I'm going to come out of this, then you'll pay!" Griso held his breath and, as best he could, avoided facing the source of these words.

"Hold him tight," said the other monatto. "He's delirious."

By this point it was true. After a loud cry, after one last violent wrench to free himself, Don Rodrigo suddenly collapsed, exhausted and unconscious. His eyes were still open, however, as if in a trance, and every so often he revived or moaned.

The monatti took him, one by the feet, the other by the shoulders, and placed him on the stretcher they had left in the next room. One came back to retrieve the loot. Then they lifted their sorry burden and carried him away.

Griso stayed behind to quickly wrap in a bundle whatever struck his fancy, then left. He had been careful not to touch the monatti or let them touch him. In the final fury of looting, however, he had taken his master's clothes from where they lay near the bed and shaken them without a second thought, to see if there was any money in them. But he would have second thoughts the next day, when, as he was stuffing his face at a greasy tavern, he was suddenly gripped by chills, his eyesight clouded over, his strength failed, and he collapsed. Abandoned by his companions, he, too, fell prey to the monatti. They stripped him of everything valuable in his possession and threw him on a cart, where he died before reaching the same lazaretto that had just welcomed his master.

Now we will leave Don Rodrigo behind in this nest of despair, and go in search of another man, whose story would never have intersected with Don Rodrigo's had it not been forced upon him. Indeed, it is certain that neither of them would have even had a story: I am speaking, of course, of Renzo, whom we last saw at his new silk mill, where he was going by the name of Antonio Rivolta.

He had been in the area for four or five months when hostilities broke out between the Republic of Venice and the Kingdom of Spain; this assuaged his fears about his arrest and extradition to Milan. Bortolo rushed to tell him that he could work for him again. He was fond of Renzo, and knew that the talented youth was a skilled worker who would be a great help to the factory foreman. Not to mention that he was also not afraid of Renzo aspiring to take his job because of his cousin's damned misfortune of not knowing how to hold a pen. I felt obliged to mention this, since it certainly factored into Bortolo's decision to bring Renzo back to the mill. Would you readers have preferred a more idealistic Bortolo? Well, you'll have to create your own. That's simply the way he was.

So Renzo stayed on to work for him. Every now and then, he would fantasize about quitting his job and becoming a soldier, especially after being blessed with a letter from Agnese. There was no lack of opportunity, since Venice needed men during that time. The temptation grew even stronger when there was talk of invading Milan. And of course he dreamed of returning home, the conquering hero, seeing Lucia again, and finally being able to tell her everything. But Bortolo always managed to bring him back down to earth.

"If they've got to go," he would say, "they can go without you. You can go later, in your own sweet time. And if they come back with bandages wrapped around their heads, won't you be glad you stayed home? There'll be no shortage of desperate men ready to pave the way to Milan. But can you imagine what they'll go through before they set foot there? . . . Me, I'm not convinced. Venice can talk tough, but Milan is hardly a sitting duck. We're talking about Spain, after all, and you know what a big deal Spain is. Venice might

be strong in its own backyard, but it'll take a lot more than that to take on the Spanish Empire.

"Be patient. Aren't you happy here? . . . I know what you mean, but everything's going to work out if the heavens above decide they will, and you can bet, without doing anything crazy, that things will work out for the best. Some saint or other will intercede. Believe me, a soldier's life is no life for you. What sense does it make to go from spinning silk to shooting and killing? Why would you want to get mixed up with people like that? That's a job designed for a certain type of man."

At times Renzo would resolve to travel under an assumed name, in disguise. But Bortolo managed to dissuade him every time, with arguments that are all too easy to imagine.

Once the plague broke out in the Milanese state, right on the border of Bergamo, as I have said, it was only a matter of time until it crossed into Venetian territory. And . . . please don't be upset with me if I refrain from telling you the history of the plague in Bergamo. For anyone interested, there is a publicly commissioned study by a certain Lorenzo Ghirardelli, a rare and little-known book, even though it contains perhaps more material than all the more famous accounts of the plague combined. Well, who knows what determines the fame of a book?*

Getting back to Renzo, what I meant to say is that he also caught the plague and recovered from it on his own. By doing nothing. He was on death's door, but his robust constitution defeated the illness: In just a few days he was out of danger.

With his return to health, his memories, desires, hopes, and plans for the future came flooding back, more powerful than ever. That is to say, he thought of Lucia more than ever. What would become of her at a time like this, when being alive was the exception rather than the rule? And to be so near yet have no news of her? And to remain, for God knows how much longer, in such uncertainty! And

* Lorenzo Ghirardelli, *Il memorando contagio seguito in Bergamo l'anno 1630* (Bergamo: Fratelli Rossi, 1681).

what if this uncertainty were to vanish and, once all danger was past, he found out that Lucia was still alive? There was always that other mystery, the messy business of her vow.

"I'm going to go to her myself and get to the bottom of this," he said to himself, even before he was strong enough to stand. "So long as she's alive! Find her? I'll find her. I have to hear from her lips, once and for all, what this vow is about. I'll let her know that she can't keep it, and I'll take her away with me, she and poor Agnese, if she's alive! She's always been fond of me, and I'm sure she still is. So what if there's a warrant on my head? Those who are alive have other things on their minds. You should see the kinds of people walking around here, with warrants of their own, but free as the day! . . . So are criminals the only ones who get a safe-conduct? And in Milan, everyone says that things are even more chaotic. If I miss a good opportunity like this—[yes, he was talking about the plague! Look at how our blessed inclination to refer and subordinate everything to ourselves influences the words we choose!]—I won't get another one like it!"

You can always hope, dear Renzo.

As soon as he could drag himself out of bed, he went looking for Bortolo, who had managed to avoid the plague up to this point and was very cautious. So rather than enter his house, Renzo called out to him from the street and made him come to the window.

"Aha!" said Bortolo. "You cheated death. Good for you!"

"I'm still a little shaky on my legs, as you can see, but I'm out of danger."

"I wish I were in your shoes. Once upon a time it was enough to say, 'I'm fine.' Nowadays we're happy if we can say, 'I'm better.' "

After wishing his cousin the best of luck, Renzo told him of his decision.

"Go on ahead then, and may God bless you," Bortolo replied. "You try to steer clear of the police, and I'll try to steer clear of the epidemic. And if God is on our side, we shall meet again."

"Oh, I'll be back, and I won't be back alone, not if I can help it! I can only hope!"

"Come back in good company, because, God willing, there'll be work for everyone, and we can do it side by side. So long as I'm still here, and this evil hour has passed!"

"We'll meet again! We can! We must!"

"God willing!" Bortolo repeated.

For several days Renzo exercised to test and rebuild his strength. As soon as he felt fit for the journey, he prepared to leave. He strapped a money belt under his clothes with the fifty scudi that he had never touched or mentioned, not even to Bortolo. He also took some money that he'd been setting aside by scrimping on everything. He tucked a bundle of clothes under his arm, and put a letter of recommendation from his most recent master in his pocket, using the name Antonio Rivolta, just to be safe. In his trouser pocket he stuck a dagger, which was the bare minimum that an honest man should carry in those days. And toward the end of August, he set off, three days after Don Rodrigo had been taken to the lazaretto. To avoid arriving in Milan in a state of complete ignorance, he took the road to Lecco, so he could stop by his home village. Hopefully he would find Agnese alive and well, and glean some information he was very anxious to hear.

The few people who had recovered from the plague were like a privileged class among the rest of the population, since almost everyone else was languishing or dying. Those who had been untouched by the disease so far lived in constant fear of it. They moved about furtively, warily, with suspicious looks on their faces, taking measured steps, in a combination of haste and hesitation, since anything could be fatal to them. Those who had recovered, on the other hand, were almost confident (since it would have been more miraculous than rare for the plague to strike twice), moving through the epidemic freely and resolutely, like medieval knights, armored from head to toe, and mounted on horses that, as much as possible, were likewise outfitted. In this manner, they wandered wherever fate might lead (hence the glorious name of knights-errant) among the poor pedestrian riffraff of city and country folk whose only weapon to ward off death and soften the blow were the

rags on their backs. Ah, the knighthood! Such a beautiful, wise, and useful profession. Just the thing to place at the beginning of a treatise on political economy.

Renzo made his way home beneath a beautiful sky and through a beautiful countryside with this same confidence, but tempered by the apprehensions that the reader knows, and saddened by the frequent sight and ceaseless thought of the general calamity. For long stretches of plaintive solitude, he ran into no one except the occasional wandering shadow rather than a living being, or corpses being carted to the common grave without funeral rites, without singing, without mourners. Toward midday, he stopped in a forest to eat a little bread and cheese that he had brought with him. There was plenty of ripe fruit along the road—figs, peaches, plums, apples—more than he could need or want. All he had to do was detour into the fields and pick them, or gather the culls beneath the trees, from which they had rained down like hail. The crops had been quite abundant, especially with fruit, but there was almost no one to harvest them. Even the grapes were so plump that they covered their leaves, and were left to the mercy of the first passerby.

As evening fell, Renzo arrived in his village. No matter how much he had prepared himself, he felt heartsick at the sight of it. He was suddenly overwhelmed with painful memories and painful forebodings. In his ears he could still hear the tolling of the bells that had accompanied and pursued him as he fled the town. In a way, he could also hear the deathly silence now looming over it. As he entered the small piazza in front of the church, his dread increased. And he expected to feel even worse at the end of his trek, since he was headed toward the place that he had once thought of as Lucia's home. Now, at best, it could be called Agnese's house. The only blessing he hoped to receive from heaven was to find her alive and in good health, and to be able to ask if he could stay with her, assuming (rightly) that his own home was inhabited only by mice and weasels.

He cut through a field to avoid being seen, taking the same path he had once followed in the dead of night, in better company, to

catch the priest by surprise. Halfway down the path, there was his old vineyard to one side and his old cottage to the other, and he planned to stop there for a moment to check on the condition of both.

He stared straight ahead as he walked, both hoping and fearing that he would see someone. After a few steps, he did, in fact, spot a man in shirtsleeves, sitting listlessly on the ground, leaning against a jasmine bush. From his posture and his features, he looked a lot like Gervaso, the poor half-wit who had acted as his second witness on that failed earlier expedition. But as he came closer, he saw that it was in fact Tonio, the smarter one, who had led the way that day. The plague had sapped both his body and his mind, and brought out a slight, veiled resemblance to his feebleminded brother in his face and every gesture.

"Oh, Tonio," Renzo said, stopping in front of him, "is that you?"

Tonio looked up, without moving his head.

"Tonio! Don't you recognize me?"

"When your time is up, it's up," replied Tonio, sitting there, his mouth agape.

"So you caught it, too, eh? Poor Tonio. Don't you recognize me anymore?"

"When your time is up, it's up," is all he replied, with an inane smile. Seeing he could get nothing more out of him, Renzo continued on his way, even sadder than before. A dark figure came around the corner, whom he immediately recognized as Don Abbondio. He was walking very slowly, leaning on his cane as if it was leaning on him. When he came closer, it was clear from his pale, haggard face that he, too, had been through the storm.

The priest stared Renzo up and down. Was this someone he knew? There was something foreign about his clothing (and foreign it was, since it came from Bergamo!). "It's him, no question," he said to himself, raising his hands to the sky in a gesture of disgruntled surprise, waving his cane in the air with his right hand.

His poor arms were swimming in sleeves that used to be snug. Renzo walked toward him, lengthening his stride, and bowed. Al-

though, as you know, they had not been exactly on good terms the last time they'd met, he was still the parish priest.

"It's you? You're here?" exclaimed Don Abbondio.

"Yes, I'm here, as you can see. Have you heard anything from Lucia?"

"How am I supposed to know? I don't know anything. She's in Milan, if she is still of this world. But you . . ."

"And Agnese, is she alive?"

"Maybe. But what do I know? She's not here. But . . ."

"Where is she?"

"She went to stay in the Valsassina, with relatives in Pasturo, as you know. They say that the plague isn't wreaking havoc there like it is here. But you, I was asking . . ."

"I'm sorry to hear it. And Padre Cristoforo?"

"He left a while ago. But . . ."

"I know. I heard in a letter. I was wondering if he'd come back here by any chance."

"Oh, of course. We haven't heard another word from him. But you . . ."

"I'm sorry to hear that, too."

"But I was saying, you? What are you doing in these parts, for the love of God? Did you forget that minor detail of the warrant for your arrest . . . ?"

"What do I care? They've got other things on their minds. I wanted to come check on my affairs myself. You really don't know if . . ."

"What did you want to see? No one is left. Nothing is left. As I was saying, with the minor detail of that warrant, to come here, to this village, in the jaws of the wolf, was that a smart thing to do? A word to the wise from an old man who, unlike you, is forced to keep his wits about him, and who speaks to you from the love in his heart: Before anyone sees you, lace up your boots, and go back from where you came. And if someone has seen you, the faster you leave the better. Is this any time for you to be here? Don't you know they

came looking for you, turning your house upside down, ransacking it from floor to ceiling . . ."

"Unfortunately I do know, the swine!"

"Well?"

"As I said, I don't care. What about Don Rodrigo? Is he still alive? Is he here?"

"I'm telling you, no one's left. I'm telling you to stop worrying about what's happening here. I'm telling you that . . ."

"I'm asking if he's here."

"For heaven's sake! Careful what you say! How can you still have all that fire inside after everything that's happened?"

"Is he here or not?"

"He's not, enough now. But the plague, my son, the plague! Who in his right mind would be wandering around in times like these?"

"You'd think there was nothing but plague in the world . . . Let me speak for myself: I caught it, so now I'm in the clear."

"Well! Wasn't that a sign? When you survive something like that, you should thank God, and . . ."

"I do, every day."

"And don't go looking for more trouble, I'm saying. Do as I do . . ."

"You had it, too, Father, unless I'm mistaken."

"Yes, I did! A wicked abomination it was. It's a miracle I'm still alive. Look at the shape it left me in! Now I really need some peace and quiet to get back on my feet. In fact, I was starting to feel a little better . . . for heaven's sake, what are you doing here? Go back!"

"Still rattling on about my going back? Well, if I wanted to go back, I may as well have stayed where I was. You keep asking, 'What did you come here for?' Really? I've come home!"

"Ah, your home . . ."

"Tell me, how many people have died?"

"Ach!" exclaimed Don Abbondio. And starting with Perpetua, he went down a list of individuals and whole families. Renzo had unfortunately been expecting such news, but to hear the names of so

many people he knew, the names of friends, of relatives, overwhelmed him with grief. With his head lowered, he kept exclaiming, "Poor boy!" "Poor girl!" "Poor things!"

"So you see!" continued Don Abbondio. "And it's not over. If the ones who are left don't get smart and chase the nonsense out of their heads, then all we've got left is to wait for the end of the world."

"Don't worry. I have no intention of staying here."

"Ah, thank heaven you finally understand. So does this mean you intend to return to Bergamo?"

"That's no concern of yours."

"What? Don't tell me you're going to make even more trouble for me!"

"Like I said, that's none of your concern. I'm not a child anymore. I can think for myself. But I hope you won't tell anyone you saw me. You are a priest. I am a member of your flock. You wouldn't want to betray me."

"I see," Don Abbondio grumbled, "I see. You want to ruin yourself, and to ruin me while you're at it. Haven't you already been through enough? Haven't I already been through enough? I see, I see." Muttering these last words between his teeth, he continued on his way.

Renzo stood there, sad, disconsolate, wondering which way to go. On the list of the dead recited by Don Abbondio, there was a family of peasants who had all been carried away by the plague, except for a young man, a childhood friend who was almost the same age as Renzo. His house was just outside the village. He decided to pay him a visit.

Along the way he passed by his own vineyard. From the outside he could already tell what kind of condition it was in. Not a single branch or leaf of the trees he had planted peered over the wall. The only thing he could see was the vegetation that had grown in his absence. At the entrance, not even the hinges of the gate were left. He took a look around: "My poor vineyard!"

For two successive winters, whenever the villagers needed fire-

wood, they would go to "the poor boy's place," as they called it. Everything had been pulled up by the roots or roughly chopped down: grapevines, mulberries, and fruit trees of every kind. You could still see the vestiges of the old plantings through new growth in crooked lines where there used to be straight rows. Here and there fresh twigs or shoots sprouted from mulberry, fig, peach, cherry, and plum trees. But even they were choked and crowded out by a dense variety of new growth that had germinated and flourished, untended by human hands. There was a riot of nettles, ferns, ryegrass, scutch, goosefoot, wild oat, green amaranth, chicory, sorrel, cockspur, and the like, otherwise known as weeds by farmers throughout the world. There was a tangle of stalks competing to climb higher or spread wider than each other, creeping along the ground in every direction, through a jumble of leaves, flowers, and fruits of a hundred different colors, shapes, and sizes. Ears of wheat and corn were topped by tufts and clusters of white, red, yellow, and blue flowers.

Amid this riot of vegetation, certain plants stood out more prominently and conspicuously than others, though they were no better, or at least, not most of them. The tallest was pokeweed, with its reddish outstretched branches and majestic dark-green leaves, some of which already had purple edges and dangling bunches of berries, which ranged in color from deep purple on the bottom to violet then green, with tiny white blossoms on the tip. The large woolly leaves of the mullein were on the ground while its stem was in the air, its tall spikes spattered and speckled with bright yellow flowers. Then there was the thistle's prickly stems, leaves, and calyx, with tufts of white and purple flowers blooming or silvery-gray plumes breaking off and blowing away in the wind. In one spot, a clump of wild morning glories had climbed and wrapped itself around the shoots of a mulberry tree, covering it with their drooping leaves and dangling white trumpet flowers. In another, a bryony, with its red berries, had wound itself tightly around the fresh shoots of a grapevine, which, after searching in vain for a more solid support, had wrapped its own tendrils around the bryony in turn. They

had twisted their feeble stems and not dissimilar leaves around one another and pulled each other down, as often happens when the weak lean on each other for support.

Brambles were everywhere, traveling from one plant to the next, creeping up and down, bending or lengthening the branches at will. They also traversed the front of the vineyard, as if to bar entrance even to the owner.

But Renzo didn't have the heart to enter his vineyard in that condition, and might have spent even less time looking at it than we have in sketching it. He walked straight to his destination, the cottage. He crossed the garden, wading knee-deep through the weeds that had invaded and covered it just like the vineyard. He set foot on the threshold of one of the two ground-floor rooms.

At the sound of his footsteps and the sight of his appearance, rats scampered and fled in every direction, burrowing under the filth that covered the floor on which the Landsknechts had slept. He glanced at the walls: cracked, dirty, blackened with soot. He looked up at the loft: a canopy of cobwebs. That's all that was left.

Distraught, he ran from the house, back the way he came, retracing the path he had made a few moments earlier. After a few steps, he took a footpath to the left that cut through the fields. Without seeing or hearing another living soul, he approached the cottage where he had thought he might stop and rest. It was already getting dark. His friend was in the doorway, sitting on a wooden stool, his arms crossed and his eyes staring at the sky, like a man whom misfortune had driven mad and solitude had turned wild. Hearing footsteps, he turned to see who it might be. Between the branches and the leaves, he thought he caught a glimpse of someone who had been pestering him. "Go bother someone else!" he said in a loud voice, standing up and shaking his hands. "Didn't I do enough yesterday? Leave me alone for a while. That would be an act of mercy!"

Renzo, not knowing what he meant, called him by his name.

"Renzo?" said the other man, both excited and skeptical.

"One and the same," replied Renzo, and they ran toward each other.

"It really is you!" said his friend when they were close. "I'm so happy to see you! Who would believe it? I thought you were Paolino the gravedigger, who's always coming here to bug me, to get me to help him. You see I'm the only one left. I'm alone, all alone, like a hermit!"

"Unfortunately I do know," said Renzo. Quickly trading and overlapping greetings, questions, and answers, they entered the cottage together. Without interrupting their conversation, his friend busied himself playing the host, as best he could manage with so little warning and at a time like this. He put a kettle of water on the fire and started to make polenta, handing the wooden spoon over to Renzo, so he could stir. Then he went out saying, "I'm alone, all alone!"

He came back in with a small pail of milk, a little dried meat, some fresh cheese, and figs and peaches, and set everything on the table. Once the polenta had been turned out onto a wooden board, they sat down and thanked each other, one for the visit, the other for the hospitality. After an almost two-year absence, they suddenly found themselves closer than they had been during the days when they used to see each other all the time. Because both of them, according to the manuscript, had learned that kindness is a balm for the soul, both in the giving and the receiving.

Of course for Renzo no one could take Agnese's place, or console him in her absence. This was not only because of their special lifelong affection, but also because she alone held the key to what he was intent on deciphering. For a moment he was torn between continuing on to Milan or going to see Agnese first, since she was not so far away. But she wouldn't know anything about Lucia's health, so he kept with his original plan: to go to Milan straightaway to rid himself of his doubts, hear what Lucia had to say, and then return to her mother with the news.

His friend told him many things he didn't know, and some things that he knew only vaguely, about Lucia's adventures, the persecutions she had suffered, and the way Don Rodrigo had fled with his tail between his legs, never to be seen in the area again; in short,

the whole complicated mess. He also learned Don Ferrante's real surname—which for Renzo was no minor detail. Agnese had dictated it to a scribe, but heaven knows how he had transcribed it, and how the Bergamo interpreter who had read the letter to Renzo had pronounced it. If he had used that name to go looking for the house in Milan, he probably wouldn't have found a single person who knew what he was talking about. Yet that was the only thread he had to search for Lucia.

As for the warrant, his friend confirmed that it was a remote threat, nothing to worry about. The Mayor had died of the plague, and no one knew when another one would be sent. Most of the police had abandoned the area, and the few who remained had more on their mind than pursuing old cases.

He told his friend about his own adventures, and heard a hundred other stories in exchange, about the passage of the army, the plague, the anointers, the incredible occurrences. "Such awful things," his friend said, while accompanying him to a bedroom vacated by the plague, "things I'd never thought we'd live to see, enough to drain all the joy from life." But it was a relief to be able to talk about them between friends.

At the break of day, both men were in the kitchen. Renzo had prepared for his journey by hiding his money belt under his doublet, and tucking his dagger into the pocket of his breeches. To travel lightly, he left his bundle with his host. "If things go well there," he said, "if I find her alive, if . . . enough already . . . I'll be back. First, I'll run to Pasturo, to give poor Agnese the good news, and then, and then . . . But if, by chance, if the news is bad, God help us . . . I don't know what I'll do or where I'll go. But in that case, I do know that you won't see me around here anymore."

As he stood speaking in the doorway, he leaned his head back and gazed with both tenderness and sorrow at dawn breaking over his village, a sight he had not seen for such a long time. His friend told him, as people will do, to keep his hopes up. He insisted that he bring along something to eat and accompanied him for a stretch of the way. Then he bid him farewell, again wishing him all the best.

Renzo walked at a leisurely pace. His goal was to reach the outskirts of Milan that day, and enter the city early the next morning, to begin his search at oncé. His journey was uneventful. Nothing happened that might distract Renzo from his thoughts, except for the usual misery and despair. Like the day before, he stopped by a wood for a bite to eat and a nap.

On his way through Monza, he passed by an open shop with bread loaves on display. He asked for two, so that he would have more for later. The baker gestured at him to stay outside, and passed him a bowl of water and vinegar on a small palette, telling him to toss the coins into it. Then he gave him the two bread loaves with a long pair of tongs, one at a time, which Renzo stuck in his pockets.

In the late afternoon he arrived in Greco, a town he'd never heard of. But he did remember the places he'd been during his last trip, managed to calculate the distance from Monza, and determined that he wasn't far from the city, so he left the main road to cut through the fields in search of a hut where he could spend the night to avoid running into any more trouble at inns. What he found was even better than he'd expected. He saw a gap in a hedge that circled a barnyard, took a chance, and went through. No one was about. In one corner he noticed a big barn, with piles of hay inside and a ladder leaning against the side. He took a look around and then climbed up, not knowing what he'd find. He settled down and fell asleep immediately, not waking up until dawn. Then, he crawled to the edge of that giant bed. Sticking his head out and seeing no one, he climbed down the same way he had climbed up, left the way he had arrived, and set out on the footpath, using the Duomo as his lodestar. After a short walk, he reached the walls of Milan, between Porta Orientale and Porta Nuova, and very close to the latter.

Chapter 34

As for how to enter the city, Renzo had heard something about strict orders not to let anyone enter its gates without a health certificate. But he'd also heard that a resourceful man who seized the moment could easily evade this decree. And he was right. Apart from the general reasons for lax enforcement of orders during that period, and the specific ones making it so difficult to execute them strictly, Milan was in such a state by then that no one saw the point of guarding it, and what to guard against. Anyone who arrived would probably seem more careless about their own health than threatening to the health of Milan's citizens.

With this in mind, Renzo planned to enter through the first gate he saw. And if he ran into some obstacle, he would circle the wall from the outside until he found another gate with easier entry. God knows how many gates he imagined Milan had! When he arrived beneath the walls, he stopped to look around, like a man who, not knowing which road to take, thinks it best to wait and look for a sign before deciding on a direction. To the right and the left, all Renzo could see were two stretches of a crooked road. Opposite him was a wall. There was no sign of human life. From one spot on the ramparts, however, a column of thick dark smoke rose, widening and curling into woolly clouds that vanished into the stagnant gray air. It was the smoke of burning clothing, beds, and other infected household goods. Grim fires like these burned constantly, not only there but also along other parts of the wall.

The weather was sweltering, the air heavy, the sky covered by an even, motionless cloud or haze that blocked the sun without prom-

ising rain. The surrounding countryside was fallow in places and arid everywhere. Every plant was discolored, not a bead of dew on their limp and withered leaves. Such solitude, such silence, near a big city increased Renzo's sense of foreboding and apprehension as his thoughts grew darker.

He stood there for a while, then took his chances and turned right, not realizing that he was heading toward Porta Nuova, though it was close, since it was hidden behind a bastion. After a few steps, he heard a tinkling of bells, starting and stopping, and then some male voices. He continued on. As he rounded the corner, the first thing he spotted was a wooden sentry box and a weary shabby-looking guard standing at the door, leaning on his musket. Behind the box was a stockade, and beyond that, the gate: namely, two roughly built walls connected by a parapet that sheltered the two large swinging doors. The doors were wide open, as was the entrance to the stockade. But on the ground directly in front of the opening lay a grim impediment: a stretcher onto which two monatti were lowering a poor man in order to carry him away. It was the chief customs officer, who had just been found to have the plague.

Renzo stood still, waiting for them to finish. After they departed, the gate was still open behind them. Renzo saw his opportunity and started to run. The guard shouted at him threateningly, "You there!" Renzo stopped in his tracks and, looking the man in the eye, pulled out a half-ducat from his pocket, and held it up to show the guard. The guard—who had either already had the plague, or feared the plague more than he loved half-ducats—gestured at Renzo to toss the coin to him. When it landed at his feet, he whispered, "Make it quick!" Renzo didn't need to be told twice.

He passed through the stockade, then the gate, and continued on without anyone noticing or minding. That is until he had taken another forty steps, and a customs officer shouted "You there!" This time Renzo pretended not to hear and, without turning around, started to walk more quickly. "You there," the customs officer shouted again, but in a voice that indicated impatience rather than a determination to be obeyed. So when Renzo continued to ignore

him, the officer shrugged his shoulders and returned to his sentry box, more worried about keeping his distance from pedestrians than inquiring into their business.

The road Renzo had taken used to lead, and still does, to the canal known as the Naviglio. It was lined on both sides by hedges or garden walls, churches and monasteries, and only a few houses. As Renzo looked ahead of him, all he could see was a tall column at the end of the street alongside the canal, bearing a cross: the Sant'Eusebio Cross. Upon reaching the fork in the road at the halfway point, he looked in both directions. To his right, a man was walking toward him on the road called the Santa Teresa Stradone. "A human being, at last!" Renzo said to himself, and turned that way, thinking he might get directions.

The man had also noticed the approaching stranger and from the distance eyed him warily, with suspicion, especially when he realized that, rather than continuing past, the stranger was walking straight up to him. Renzo, always the respectful country lad, removed his hat as he approached the man. With his left hand holding the hat, and his right inside the crown, he went up to the man. But the man took a step back, his eyes popping out, raised his knotty walking stick, and pointed its steel tip at Renzo's waist, shouting, "Keep your distance!"

"Oh! Oh!" cried Renzo. He put his hat back on, having no desire to get into a fight, as he would later tell the story. He turned his back on the bizarre man and continued on his way, that is to say, in the direction in which he was already going.

The other man also went on his way, his whole body shaking, and kept looking over his shoulder. When he arrived home, he claimed he had been accosted by an anointer; though this young man appeared meek and mild, he had the face of an evil imposter, and he was hiding a little box of unguent or a packet of powder (he wasn't sure which), in the hat he was carrying, ready to play a dirty trick on him if he hadn't chased him away. "One more step," he added, "and I'd have run him through before he got the better of me, the

scoundrel. Unfortunately, we were in an isolated place. If it'd been the center of Milan, I'd have called for help and got people to grab him. They'd have found that evil potion in his hat for sure. But I was there by my lonesome, so the best I could do was scare him away, and keep myself out of harm's reach. It only takes a second to throw a little powder, and they're quite good at it. And they've got the devil on their side. Now he's making the rounds in Milan: God only knows how many victims he's taken!"

For the rest of his life, which was a long life indeed, he would repeat this story whenever the conversation turned to the anointers, adding, "Anyone who still insists it isn't true had better not say it to my face. Seeing is believing!"

As he continued on his way, Renzo, far from realizing what a narrow escape he'd just made, and shaken more by anger than by fear, was reflecting on that greeting, and trying to imagine exactly what the unknown man had thought of him. But it all seemed so irrational that he reached the conclusion that the man must have been half crazy.

"Getting off to a bad start," he thought, "there must be an evil star for me here in Milan. At first everything went smoothly at the gates. But now that I'm inside, trouble awaits me at every corner. Never mind . . . with the help of God . . . when I find . . . that is, if I can find . . . then none of this will matter."

At the bridge he turned left without hesitation, down Via San Marco, correctly guessing that it led to the center of the city. As he went, he looked around, hoping to find another human being, but the only body he saw was a corpse rotting in a ditch between the few houses (which were even fewer back then) and a stretch of the road. After he passed it, he heard someone call out, "You there!" He looked in the direction of the voice and saw a poor woman standing on the nearby balcony of an isolated house, surrounded by a brood of children. As she called out to him, she gestured with her hand. He ran toward her, and when he got closer, "Young man," she said, "for the sake of your own dearly departed, could you do us the

kindness of going to the commissioner to tell him we've been forgotten here? They locked us up on suspicion, because my poor husband died. And as you can see, they nailed the door shut. No one has come to bring us food since yesterday morning. In the many hours we've been here, not a single Christian has happened by who would do me this kindness, and these poor innocent children are dying of hunger."

"Hunger!" exclaimed Renzo. "Here you are," he said, digging into his pockets to take out the two loaves of bread, "send me down something to put them in."

"May God bless you. Just a minute," said the woman, and she went to look for a basket and a rope to lower it. While he waited, Renzo remembered the last time he had come to Milan, when he had found bread near the cross. He said to himself, "Ah: So this is reparations. I'm glad I did not give the bread back to the bakery that day, for this is truly an act of mercy."

"As for the commissioner, ma'am," he added as he placed the loaves in the basket, "I'm afraid I can't help you there, because, to tell you the truth, I'm a foreigner, and I don't know my way around. But if I do come across someone local, who looks kind enough to speak with me, I'll let him know."

The woman implored him to do just that, and gave him the name of her street so he could give directions.

"And might I ask you for a favor," Renzo went on to say, "a true act of charity, if it's no trouble? Would you happen to know where I can find the house of a nobleman, a grand signore, here in Milan, who goes by the name of ***?"

"I've heard of that house," the woman replied, "but I'm not sure where it is. If you keep walking in this direction, I'm sure you'll find someone to tell you. And please don't forget to tell them about us."

"You can count on me," said Renzo, and he continued on his way.

With every step he heard a sound growing closer and louder, a noise he had first noticed as he spoke with the trapped woman. It was the sound of wheels and horses, a tinkling of bells, and every now and then, a crack of the whip accompanied by a shout. He

looked straight ahead but could see nothing. At the end of the street, he found himself in Piazza San Marco, where the first thing he saw was two upright beams with a rope and some pulleys. He quickly recognized what used to be an all-too-familiar sight in those days: the abominable instrument of torture, the *strappado.* There was just such an instrument not only there but on nearly every square and major street. This allowed the deputies in each neighborhood, who had been given the most arbitrary powers, to apply it immediately to anyone whom they thought deserved punishment: people who had broken quarantine, disobedient servants, anyone. It was one of the many extreme and ineffective remedies that was used so indiscriminately in those days, and especially in moments like this.

While Renzo was looking at the instrument and wondering why it had been built there, he heard that same sound growing nearer. From around the corner of the church he saw a man appear shaking a bell: the *apparitore,* followed by two horses that struggled to move forward, straining their necks and digging in their hooves as they pulled a cartload of dead bodies. After this came another cart, and then another, and another. Monatti were on both sides of the horses, urging them on with lashes, punches, and curses.

Most of the corpses were naked, though some were loosely covered in rags. They were piled high and jumbled together, like a nest of snakes slowly uncoiling in the warmth of spring. At every jolt, every bump in the road, the tragic heap shook and came apart grotesquely. Heads dangled, maidens' braids unraveled, and arms slid out of the tangled mass of limbs to bang against the wheels, rendering an already horrifying sight even more heartbreaking and foul.

Renzo stopped in a corner of the square, near the railing of the canal, and took a moment to say a prayer for these unknown dead. An atrocious thought suddenly crossed his mind: "Maybe there, mixed in there, hidden beneath . . . Oh Lord! Let it not be so! Keep this thought from my mind!"

Once the funeral procession had passed, Renzo crossed the square and continued along the left side of the canal, for no other

reason than that the procession had gone in the opposite direction. After the few short steps between the side of the church and the canal, he saw the Marcellino Bridge on the right, crossed it, and came out into Borgo Nuovo. Looking up, and still hoping to find someone to give him directions, he saw a priest in a doublet at the end of the street, holding a walking stick in one hand. He was standing by a partly open door, his head lowered, and his ear pressed up against the opening. A few minutes later, Renzo watched him raise his hand to make the sign of the cross. He assumed the priest had just heard someone's confession, and he said to himself, "The very man I'm looking for. If a priest performing his duties can't show a little charity, love, and grace, then there must be none left in the world."

In the meantime, the priest was walking away from the door and toward Renzo, hewing very carefully to the middle of the road. Renzo doffed his hat when the priest was close to him, gesturing that he wished to have a word and, at the same time, stopping to indicate that he would come no closer. The other man also stopped, ready to listen, though he set his walking stick on the ground before him, as if to mark a barrier. Renzo asked his question, which the priest answered, giving him not only the name of the street where the house was located, but also—since he could see that the poor boy needed it—the route, indicating the right and left turns, churches and crossroads that he would pass along the six or eight blocks it would take to get there.

"May God keep you healthy, in these times and always," said Renzo. And as he was about to set off, "One more favor," he added. He told him about the poor forgotten woman. The good priest thanked him for giving him the opportunity to do a good and necessary deed, and assured him that he would inform the proper authorities. Then he continued on his way, as did Renzo. As he was walking, he repeated the route to himself, so he would not have to ask for directions at every corner. You cannot imagine how hard this was for him, not because he struggled to remember directions, but because he was filled with a new sense of apprehension. Now

that he knew the name of the street and how to get there, he was consumed with dread. These were the clues he had wanted and sought out, because he could not manage without them. And though nothing in his conversation had hinted at any semblance of an evil omen, he was still afraid of what he would find once he got there. Can you blame him? As he got closer to the moment when his questions would finally have answers, when he would hear either, "she's alive" or "she's dead," he was so overwhelmed that, right then and there, he would rather have remained completely in the dark and gone back to the beginning of the journey that was finally about to end. But he pulled himself together and thought, "Come now! If we start to act like children, what will happen?" With these words of self-encouragement, he continued on to the heart of the city.

But what city was this? It looked even worse than it had the year before, in the midst of a famine!

Renzo was just then passing through the crossroads known as the Porta Nuova *carrobio* (in those days there was a cross in the center, opposite the old church of Sant'Anastasia, where San Francesco di Paola stands today), one of the poorest and most desolate parts of the city. So violently had the epidemic ravaged this neighborhood, and so appalling was the stench of dead bodies left to rot, that the few survivors had been forced to move. This solitary and forlorn sight filled the passerby with a despondency made worse by horror and disgust at the garbage and other debris that the inhabitants had left behind. Renzo quickened his pace, urging himself on with the thought that his destination was not in this neighborhood, and hoping that, before reaching it, he would find a scene that was different, at least in part. In fact, he emerged into an area just a short distance away that made him think this was still a city of the living. But what had the city become, and who were the living? All the front doors were locked, out of suspicion or terror, except for those left wide open after being abandoned or broken into. Other doors had been nailed shut after those inside had died or been infected by the plague. Still others were marked with a charcoal cross, to signal to

the monatti that there were dead bodies inside to be carted away. It all looked very random, depending on whether a Tribunal of Health commissioner or another official had come by and been struck by the urge to follow or disobey orders. Rags were everywhere, as were (even more repulsive) the filthy bandages, infected straw, and bedding tossed from the windows. Scattered about were the bodies of people who had dropped dead on the street and been left there until the cart came around to carry them away, or who had fallen off the carts or been tossed from a window. Rampant, relentless disaster had turned men into beasts and erased human compassion and decency. Gone were the sounds of shops, the clattering of carriages, the cries of street vendors, the chatter of passersby. Only rarely was the deathly silence broken by any sounds other than those of funeral processions, the moaning of the poor, the anguish of the sick, the howls of the dying, and the shouts of the monatti. At dawn, at noon, and in the evening, the tolling of a bell in the Duomo marked the time to recite the prayers selected by the Archbishop. The bells of other churches rang in response, and then you would have seen people appearing at their windows to pray in unison, and heard voices and sobs murmuring through the air, giving forth a sadness tinged with feelings of comfort.

By then, an estimated two-thirds of the city's inhabitants had died, while most of the others had fled or were sick. The flow of foreigners into the city had trickled down to almost nothing. Of the few people who were out and about, you would not, on a long walk, have come across a single person who did not have something strange about him, some hint of a fatal change in circumstances. The most prominent citizens went out with neither cape nor cloak, which in those days were considered essential articles of civilian dress. Priests went about without their cassocks, and even friars wore doublets. Dispensed with, in short, was any garment whose hem might brush against something or (even scarier) facilitate the work of the anointers. Apart from dressing in clothing that was as short and tight as possible, everyone was shabby and unkempt. Men who used to shave now had scruffy faces, and neatly kept beards

had grown long. Heads of hair were long and tangled, not only from the neglect born of advanced despondency, but also because barbers had been under suspicion ever since the arrest and conviction of one of their own, Gian Giacomo Mora, as an infamous anointer. His name has long been notorious in the city, but he deserves more general and lasting compassion.

Most people kept a walking stick or even a pistol in one hand, as a warning to anyone who came too close. In the other hand, they usually carried smelling salts, or perforated metal or wooden balls holding sponges that had been soaked in medicated vinegars. As they went about, they would occasionally place them under their nose or even hold them there the whole time. Some wore a vial around their necks containing a little quicksilver, convinced that it had the power to absorb and retain pestilential exhalations. Every few days they were careful to replenish it. Gentlemen now went out without their usual entourage, but they could be seen carrying a bag over their arms on their way to shop for food. When two friends ran into each other on the street, they would say hello from a distance, in hurried, wordless gestures. Everyone, as they walked, had all they could do to dodge the disgusting, deadly obstacles that littered or in places completely covered the ground. Everyone tried to stay in the middle of the road for fear of other types of filth or even deadlier objects tossed from windows; for fear of the toxic powder rumored to be often thrown at pedestrians from above; for fear of walls that might be smeared with unguent. Hence ignorance—the reverse of courage and caution—increased distress and spread unfounded terrors, usurping the sensible health precautions it had disdained at the start of the plague.

These scenes from the lives of the healthy and well-to-do were the least grotesque and piteous aspect of a situation that could be seen all around. After so many images of misery, with even more gruesome scenes to come, I will not linger to describe to the reader the sight of the plague stricken—the poor, children, and women—dragging themselves or lying in the streets. So dire were the circumstances that an observer might find an almost desperate comfort

in the very thing that makes the strongest and saddest impression on posterity or from afar: Namely, the thought that so few of the living were left.

In the midst of this desolation, Renzo was still many yards away from the street he had to enter when he heard a jumbled commotion in which he could discern the same horrid ringing as before, coming from the direction in which he was heading.

When he reached the corner of one of the widest streets in the city, he saw four carts stopped in the middle. The street was as alive with movement as a grain market, with the hustle and bustle of the crowd, the filling and emptying of sacks, monatti entering and exiting houses with bundles on their shoulders that they then deposited on the carts. Some of these ghouls were wearing the red uniform, others had no such insignia, while many bore the even more appalling distinction of multicolored plumes and bows, which they wore in a display of cheerfulness amid all the public grief. From one window, then another, the doleful cries of, "Up here, monatti" rang out. "I'm coming, I'm coming," was the grim and sinister reply from that wretched swarm. Tenants grumbled, telling them to hurry up, and monatti cursed in response.

As he entered the street, Renzo quickened his step, trying to avoid looking at the crowd for any longer than the time needed to dodge it. But suddenly, he caught sight of a singular scene of pity, a pity that invited the mind to contemplate it. He stopped, almost unwillingly.

Descending from one of those doorways and moving toward the convoy came a woman whose appearance suggested a youth that was advanced but not yet passed. She radiated a beauty that was shrouded and dimmed but not ruined by great emotion and fatal languor: the soft yet majestic beauty that runs in Lombard blood. Her gait was weary, but not unsteady. Her eyes were dry, but showed the sign of many tears. In her grief there was something peaceful and profound that attested to a soul fully aware of and alive to pain. But it was not her appearance alone, amid so much misery, that

singled her out for pity and reawakened a feeling that in human hearts had become numb and exhausted. In her arms, she was holding the lifeless body of a little girl of about nine years of age. The child had been lovingly dressed in a pure white garment, with her hair neatly parted on either side of her face, as if her mother's hands had prepared her for a long-promised celebration, offered to her as a reward. She was held not prone but upright, seated on one arm, with her chest leaning against her mother's bosom, as if she were still alive, except for a pale and waxen little hand that dangled lifelessly to one side. Her head rested on her mother's shoulder with an abandon more powerful than sleep; resting on her mother in such a way that, although the likeness of their faces might not have shown it, clearly indicated which of the two was still sentient.

One of the loathsome monatti came forward to remove the child from her arms, but with unusual deference, an almost involuntary hesitation, taking a step back, yet without any sign of disrespect or contempt. "No, please don't touch her," she said, "I should be the one to place her on the cart." She opened her hand, revealing a purse, and dropped it into the outstretched palm of the monatto. "This is for you," she said, "now promise me you won't remove a stitch from her body," she added, "and that you will bury her in the ground exactly as she is now."

The monatto placed a hand over his heart, and then, with the utmost care, almost obsequiously—more from the new sentiment that had overtaken him than the unexpected compensation—set about making room on the cart for the lifeless girl. The mother kissed her child's forehead and laid her down as if she were on a bed, arranging her tenderly and covering her with a white sheet. She then uttered the final words: "Farewell, Cecilia! Rest in peace! Tonight we will join you, and we shall be together forever. Pray for us until that moment comes, and I will be praying for you and for the others." Turning once more to the monatto, she said, "Sir, when you pass by here this evening, you will need to come upstairs to take me, too, and not just me."

With that, she went back inside the house, and appeared at the window a moment later, holding another girl in her arms, this one even younger. The child was still alive, though the signs of death were on her face. The mother stood there contemplating the undignified funeral rites of her older daughter until the cart started to move and she could see it no longer. Then she disappeared. And what else could she do but place her one remaining child on the bed, and lie down next to her so that they might die together? Just as the flower blooming on a stem and the unopened bud beside it fall with the same swipe of the scythe that levels all the grass in the field.

"Oh Lord!" exclaimed Renzo. "Grant her wish! Take her to you! Take her to you, her and her little baby! They have suffered enough!"

Once he had recovered from that rare emotion, and while he was trying to remember the route, and whether he was supposed to take the first street, and turn right or left, he heard another, different commotion from that same corner. It was a confused sound of imperious shouts, soft moans, the sobbing of women, the bawling of children.

He continued on, his heart filled with the usual dark and gloomy foreboding. At the crossroads, he saw a bewildered multitude advancing on one side, and stopped to let them pass. They were the sick being brought to the lazaretto. Some pushed and shoved, resisting in vain, crying in vain that they wanted to die in their own beds, and hurling useless insults at the curses and commands of the monatti leading them away. Others walked in silence, numb, showing no sign of grief or any other feeling. There were women with babies clutching their necks, and children more frightened by the shouts, orders, and their company, than by the vague thought of death. With shrill cries they begged for their mothers, for their trusted arms, for their homes. Ah! And maybe their mother, whom they thought they had left behind asleep in her bed, had actually collapsed into it, suddenly taken by the plague, and was lying there, senseless, to be carted away to the lazaretto herself, or, if the cart

arrived too late, to the common grave. And maybe—oh tragedy worthy of even more bitter tears!—she had forgotten everything, even her children, left with only one thought in the throes of her suffering: to die in peace.

Yet despite all the turmoil, there were still examples of fortitude and piety: fathers, mothers, children, spouses, who supported their loved ones and accompanied them with words of comfort. Not only adults, but boys and girls also guided their younger, more vulnerable siblings, and with the wisdom and compassion of grown-ups urged them to be obedient, assuring them that they were going to a place where people would look after them and help them to get better.

Amid these tender and melancholic scenes, our traveler was seized by one thought that kept him in a state of agitation. The house had to be nearby, and who knows whether among those people . . . Once the whole company had passed, and his doubts had ceased, he turned to a monatto who was walking behind him and asked for the street and the house of Don Ferrante. "Go to hell, you yokel," came the reply. Rather than responding in kind, Renzo asked a commissioner who was following behind the group and looked a little more human. Pointing a stick in the direction from which he'd come, the man said, "The first street on the right, then the last big house on the left."

His heart gripped by a new and deeper anxiety, the young man heads in that direction. He reaches the street. He immediately picks out that house from the others, which are smaller and humbler. He approaches the main door, which is shut, places his hand on the knocker, and holds it there for a second, as if he were dipping his hand into an urn before extracting the slip of paper that will decide his fate. Finally, he lifts the knocker and gives a resolute knock.

A few moments later, a window opens slightly. A woman sticks her head out, to see who's there, with a scowl as if to say: "Monatti? Vagrants? Commissioners? Anointers? Demons?"

"Ma'am," asked Renzo in a shaky voice, looking up, "would there happen to be a young country girl working here who goes by the name of Lucia?"

"She's not here anymore. Go away!" replied the woman, moving to close the window.

"Just a moment, please! She's not here anymore? Then where is she?"

"At the lazaretto," and once again she started to shut the window.

"One moment, for heaven's sake! With the plague?"

"Why else? Don't act surprised. Be gone with you now."

"Oh, no! No! Wait, was she very sick? How long has she . . . ?"

In the meantime the window really had closed.

"Ma'am! Ma'am! One word, for the love of God! For the sake of your dearly departed! I won't ask you for anything: please!" But he might as well have been talking to a wall.

Distressed by the news, and angered by the way it was delivered, Renzo grabbed the knocker again, lifting it to knock desperately, but then, leaning against the door, he held it still. In his agitation, he turned around to see if some neighbor was nearby to give him more accurate information, a clue, an explanation. But the first and only person he saw was another woman, maybe twenty steps away. Her face expressed terror, hatred, impatience, malice. She had a distraught look in her eyes, which wanted to stare both at and away from him. She opened her mouth as if to scream bloody murder, while at the same time holding her breath. She raised her two bony arms, stretching and curling her gnarly hands into claws, as if she were trying to grab something. She seemed to want to call out to people but without attracting the attention of one person in particular. When their eyes met, she snarled and shook as if she had been trapped.

"What the devil . . . ?" Renzo started to say, also raising his hands toward the woman who, having lost all hope of catching him off guard, unleashed the scream she had been holding back. "The anointer! Catch him! Catch him! Catch the anointer!"

"Who, me? You lying witch! Shut your mouth!" shouted Renzo, and he lunged at her to try to scare her into silence. But he immediately realized that he needed to worry about himself. At the sound of the old woman's shrieks, people came running from every direction. Not as big a crowd as there might have been three months earlier, but big enough to get the better of a solitary man. At the same time, the window opened again, and the same rude woman from before stuck her whole head out and added her voice to the commotion: "Catch him! Catch him! He must be one of those scoundrels roaming the streets to anoint the doors of decent people!"

Renzo had no time to lose. He knew in a heartbeat that he'd be better off fleeing than standing there trying to explain himself. He looked to the right and the left, to see where there were fewer people, and he took off in that direction. He shoved aside one man who was blocking his way, and jabbed another man sprinting toward him in the chest, pushing him back eight or ten steps. Off he ran, clenched fist in the air, knuckles ready for anyone that got in his way. The road ahead was open, but he could hear the pounding of feet on the pavement behind him, and the harsh loud cries of, "Catch him! Catch the anointer!" He didn't know how many people were chasing him, and he couldn't see where he would find safety. Ire became rage, and distress turned into despair. As his eyes darkened, he placed his hand on his dagger, unsheathed it, stopped, and turned around with the most threatening scowl of his life. Brandishing the shiny blade in his outstretched hand, he shouted, "Whoever's got the guts, come on! You want to be anointed, you swine? I'll anoint you alright!"

To his amazement, and with a vague feeling of relief, he saw that his pursuers had stopped, and were hesitating. But they continued to shout and made frantic hand movements, as if gesturing to people far behind him. He turned around and saw (since the hubbub had kept him from noticing it in the moments before) the advance of a cart, or rather a procession of the usual death carts, and with

their usual entourage. And behind them in the distance, another mob of people were getting closer, hoping to give chase to the anointer and nab him, but the carts were blocking their way.

Caught between two fires, Renzo realized that the very thing that terrified them could be his salvation. This was no time to be squeamish. He put his knife back in its sheaf, went to one side of the street, and started running toward the carts. He ran past the first one, then spotted a nice empty space in the second. He took aim, jumped, and landed on it with his right foot, while his left was still in the air and both arms were raised.

"Bravo! Bravo!" exclaimed the monatti altogether. Some of them had followed the procession on foot, others were sitting on the cart, while still others—to show you how appalling things were—sat atop the dead bodies, drinking from a large flask being passed around. "Bravo! Nice jump!"

"So, you're seeking the protection of the monatti, are you? You couldn't have found better sanctuary in a church," said one of the two on the cart where Renzo had landed.

As the convoy approached, most of his attackers had turned and run, but not without a few parting cries of, "Catch him! Catch the anointer!" Some of them withdrew only gradually, stopping every now and then to turn around and direct jeers and threatening gestures at Renzo, who answered from the cart in kind by shaking his fist in the air.

"Let me take care of this," said one monatto. Ripping a filthy rag off a corpse, he quickly knotted it and, taking it by one corner, held it up like a slingshot, and made as if to throw it at the most persistent, shouting, "Take this, you swine!" At that gesture Renzo's pursuers fled in horror. All he could see now were the backs of his enemies and the swift kick of their heels in the air like fulling hammers.

The monatti let out a triumphant cry, an unsettling roar of laughter. A prolonged, "Ha-ha," as if to accompany his flight.

"Ha-ha! Who says we can't protect an honest man?" the monatto said to Renzo. "One of us is worth more than a hundred of those cowards!"

"Indeed. I owe my life to you," replied Renzo, "and I thank you with all my heart."

"For what?" asked the monatto. "You deserved it. Anyone can see that you're a good boy. You're right to smear unguent nowadays: Spatter them, exterminate them, they're worth nothing till they're dead. You know how they repay us for the jobs we do? They swear at us, saying once this blight is over, they'll string up the lot of us! Well, before the plague is over they'll all be gone, and we monatti'll be the only ones left, celebrating victory and living it up in Milan!"

"Long live the plague! Death to the rabble!" exclaimed his partner. With this horrid toast he put the bottle to his lips and, holding it steady with both hands while the cart jostled, took a long slug and passed it to Renzo, saying, "Now drink to our health!"

"Good health to you, each and every one, with all my heart," cried Renzo, "but I'm not thirsty, I really don't feel like drinking right now."

"You had quite a scare, from what I could see," said the monatto, "but you look like a poor thing. You don't look like an anointer."

"Everyone has to do what he can," said the other.

"Give it here," said a monatto who was walking next to the cart. "I want another slug. To the health of its owner, who's lying somewhere in this lovely company . . . I think he's buried in the pile over there."

With an evil, ghastly snicker, he pointed to the cart in front of Renzo. Then, in a solemn gesture, adopting a more sinister and cruel expression, he nodded his head in that direction. "With your permission, boss, might a poor little monatto have a taste of what's in your wine cellar? There are some excellent vintages. We're the ones who placed you in the cart to bring you on a long vacation, after all. And wine is so bad for your Lordship: It makes you sick immediately! We monatti are made of sterner stuff."

Amid the laughter of his fellow monatti, he grabbed the flask and held it up. But before drinking, he turned to Renzo, staring him straight in the face, and with a mix of pity and scorn, said, "You must have made a pact with an awfully young devil. If we hadn't

come along to rescue you, a fat lot of help he would have been!" With another snicker, he put the bottle to his lips.

"And us? What about us!" shouted voices from the cart in front. The scoundrel, having drunk his fill, tossed the flask to his buddies with both hands. They passed it from man to man until the last monatto emptied it, swung the bottle around, and sent it crashing to the pavement, shouting, "Long live the plague!"

He chased these words with a raunchy song, his voice immediately joined by all the other members of that vile crew. That infernal tune, accompanied by the tinkling of the handbells, the squeaking of the carts, and the clip-clop of horses, echoed in the silence of the empty streets and resounded in the houses, wrapping a bitter fist around the hearts of the few remaining inhabitants.

Are there no limits on what a man will do for his own convenience? Or on what he might sometimes like? The danger Renzo had just outrun made the company of those dead bodies and those living ghouls more than tolerable. And anything that removed him from their unseemly conversation was, I was about to say, like music to his ears. Still in shock and gasping for breath, he took a moment to thank Providence for getting him out of that predicament without inflicting or receiving harm. And now he prayed for Providence to help rescue him from his rescuers. He kept one eye on them and one eye on the road, looking for the right moment to slip off the cart undetected, without giving them the opportunity to cause a racket or make a scene that would turn passersby against him.

Suddenly, he thought he recognized the corner they were passing. He took a closer look. He was sure of it. And do you know where he was? On Corso di Porta Orientale, the same street that he had slowly walked up, and quickly run down, some twenty months earlier. He immediately remembered that it led straight to the lazaretto. To find himself on the right road, without having to inquire, to search, had to be a gift from Providence, and a good omen for the rest of his journey. At that very moment, a commissioner was coming toward the carts, shouting at the monatti to stop and I don't know what else. So the convoy halted and their music turned into a

loud squabble. One of the monatti on Renzo's cart jumped down. Renzo told the other, "Thank you for your kindness. May God bless you," and he, too, jumped off, but on the other side.

"On your way, on your way, poor little anointer," the man replied. "It'll take a bigger man than you to wipe out Milan."

Luckily there was no one there to hear. The convoy had stopped on the left side of the road. Renzo quickly takes the opposite side and, hewing close to the wall, heads straight for the bridge. He crosses, continues down the road through the borgo, and recognizes the Capuchin monastery. As he approaches Porta Orientale, he can see the corner of the lazaretto. He passes through the gate. The scene outside the enclosure unfolds before his eyes. It was no more than a hint, a sample of what awaited him inside, but it was already indescribable: a vast, otherworldly scene.

From the two sides of the lazaretto that Renzo could see, he spotted a swarm of people. The sick were being herded in, while others were sitting or lying down outside on the edges of the moat, too weak to walk inside or having collapsed after walking out of the shelter in desperation; still other poor souls wandered about aimlessly, in a daze. More than a few had lost their minds. One deranged man was recounting his hallucinations to a miserable wretch who was lying on the ground, oppressed by the disease. Another was having convulsions. A third looked around with a smile on his face, as if he was watching a comedy. But the strangest and loudest sound in this grim gaiety was a high, steady singing that seemed to come not from that miserable horde, but instead, rose above it. It was a country love song, joyous and playful, known as a villanelle. Renzo searched to find the source of the sound, the person who could be so cheerful in a time and place like this. He saw a poor wretch sitting at the bottom of the moat, singing at the top of his lungs, his head leaning back.

Scarcely had he taken a few steps along the southern side of the building when Renzo heard an extraordinary sound amid the multitude, and from the distance voices shouting, "Look! Grab him!" He stood on tiptoe and saw a giant horse galloping full speed with

a strange rider on top: a delirious man who, seeing the animal untethered and unguarded next to a carriage, had quickly mounted it, bareback, and, pounding its neck with his fists and digging into its sides with his heels, spurred it on in a fury.

Already weary and dismayed from the sight of so much misery, Renzo arrived at the gates of a place where more people were gathered than he had seen on his whole journey there. He walked up to the gate, passed underneath its arch, and for a moment, stood still in the middle of the portico.

Chapter 35

Reader, picture, if you will, the lazaretto: a cramped space populated by sixteen thousand plague victims, with huts and sheds here, carts there, and people everywhere; two endless fugues of porticos, to the right and the left, teeming, overflowing, with the dead and dying, all jumbled together, on pallets or straw, while a buzzing hovered over this seemingly endless shantytown. Here and there was a coming and going, a running and stopping, a bowing and standing up of the convalescent, the delirious, and the attendants. This was the sight that instantly greeted Renzo's eyes and held them, transfixed and overwhelmed.

I will not attempt to describe this scene in detail, nor would the reader want me to. Following our young man on his woeful journey, we will stop where he stops, and describe enough of what he witnessed to relate what he did, and what followed.

A pathway cleared of huts and other constructions ran from where Renzo stood at the back entrance to the chapel in the middle, and from there, to the front entrance. Upon closer inspection, Renzo noticed carts moving along it, and things being removed to make space. He saw Capuchin friars and laymen directing the operation, while sending away anyone who didn't belong there. Fearing that he, too, would be expelled, he slipped between the huts on the right, the direction in which he happened to turn.

He continued his search from hut to hut, wherever he could set his foot, poking his head inside each one, peering at beds set up outside, studying the faces wracked with pain, contracting in spasms, or motionless in death, hoping to find the very thing he was

afraid to find. He had already walked for a while, repeating his painful examination again and again, but without finding a single woman; so he wondered if they might be in a separate area. And he was right. But he had no idea where that area might be or how to find it. Every now and then he ran into attendants, who were as different in appearance and dress as they were different if not opposite in the principle that gave both one and the other equal strength to perform their duties: the extinction of all compassion in one; superhuman compassion in the other. He did not feel comfortable asking questions of either, however, to avoid running into obstacles. So he decided to continue on and try to find the women himself. As he walked, he often had to glance away from what he saw around him, nearly blinded by the sight of so much suffering. But where could he look, where could he rest his eyes, if not on more suffering?

The very air and sky compounded the horror of those sights, if anything indeed could. A dense, dark fog had rolled in, making the day feel more like a stormy night. But in the center of the low, gloomy sky, the sphere of the sun broke through faintly, as if piercing a heavy veil, flickering as it radiated its heavy dead heat. Every now and then, amid the steady drone of the jumbled multitude, a deep rumbling of thunder could be heard that seemed interrupted, hesitant. Even if you listened carefully, you could not tell where it was coming from; you might have thought it was the distant sound of carts that had screeched to a sudden halt. In the surrounding countryside not a branch moved, not a bird alit or took flight: Only the swallow, appearing suddenly on the roof of the lazaretto, swooped down with its wings outstretched, as if to rake the yard. Alarmed by the commotion, however, it quickly soared back up and away. This was the type of weather when, among a company of travelers, no one breaks the silence; the hunter stares at the ground as he walks, lost in thought; the peasant woman tilling the soil stops singing, unawares; the type of weather portending a storm, when nature—as if outwardly still while agitated by an inner distress—seems to oppress every living thing and bear down on every action, on leisure, on life itself. But in that place designed for suffering and

death, men who were already in the grips of disease could be seen succumbing to this new oppression. In the final throes of the disease, the pain became more excruciating, the moans grew more strangled, as hundreds and hundreds suddenly got worse. A crueler hour, perhaps, had not yet visited this place of misery.

The young man had already been walking for a while through that labyrinth of huts, in vain, when he began to discern a singular mix of wailing and bleating among the various laments, until he reached a splintered, rickety stockade from where that peculiar sound seemed to be coming. He placed his eye against a wide crack between two boards and spotted a fenced-off area with a smattering of huts. There he saw an infirmary, or rather babies lying on little mattresses, pillows, unfolded sheets, or quilts, while wet nurses and other women fussed over them. What most drew and held his gaze were the goats that mingled about, acting as the nurses' helpers: a hospital for the innocents, as best could be afforded by that time and place. It was, I was saying, quite a sight to see these animals stand calmly over one baby and then another, offering their udders, or trot over to the sound of wailing, with an almost maternal instinct, and stop next to and try to position themselves above the little nursling, bleating and wagging their tails as if calling for someone to help the two of them.

Wet nurses were sitting here and there with babies held against their breasts, some so lovingly as to make the observer wonder whether they had been drawn there by the pay or by the charity that spontaneously seeks out the needy and the afflicted. One woman, crestfallen, removed a crying infant from her weary breast and went sadly in search of an animal to take her place. Another gazed tenderly at the little one who had fallen asleep on her breast, and, kissing it gently, went into a hut to lay it down on a little mattress. But a third, surrendering her breast to a little stranger, stared at the sky not with an air of indifference but of distraction. What was she thinking, through that gesture, through that expression on her face, if not of a child of her own womb who had perhaps suckled on her breast not very long ago, and perhaps died upon it.

Older women attended to other chores. One ran to pick up a crying baby and carry it to a goat that was grazing on a pile of fresh grass. She placed the baby on the udder, scolding and patting the inexperienced animal until it meekly acquiesced to the task. One woman ran to rescue a poor infant that had been trampled by a goat that was busy nursing another baby. A third woman rocked a child back and forth in her arms, singing a lullaby, trying to coo it to sleep with songs and soft words, calling it by a name she had given the baby herself.

A Capuchin with a snow-white beard arrived carrying two shrieking babies, one in each arm, whom he had found lying next to their deceased mothers. A woman ran to take them and immediately looked around the group of women and animals to see who could take their mothers' places.

Renzo tried to look away more than once, driven by his primary, predominant concern, only to go back and peer through the opening for a little while longer. Finally, he pulled himself away and walked along the fence until he came upon a cluster of huts that blocked his path and forced him to turn around. He went between the huts to try to find the fence again, so that he could follow it to the end and discover a new country. While he was looking ahead, trying to figure out a path, a sudden, fleeting, momentary apparition caught his eye and made his heart stop. A hundred yards ahead, he saw a Capuchin friar pass by and immediately disappear between the huts: a Capuchin who, even from this distance and at a glance, had the same gait, demeanor, and shape as Fra Cristoforo.

With all the agitation you can imagine, Renzo ran in the man's direction. He searched the labyrinth of huts, up and down, inside and out, until, with a joy that matched his agitation, he spotted again that same form, that same friar, just ahead of him, stepping away from a kettle and walking toward a hut with a bowl in his hand. Renzo saw him sit down in the doorway and make the sign of the cross over the bowl. Then, after casting his gaze around like a man who is always alert, he started to eat. It was indeed Padre Cristoforo.

To tell his story from the moment we lost sight of him until this

encounter will only take a couple of words. He did not leave Rimini, nor had he considered doing so, until the breakout of the plague in Milan gave him the opportunity to do something he had always wanted to do: sacrifice his life for his fellow man. He pleaded insistently to be recalled from his current posting so he could attend to and serve the plague-stricken. Since the man who had forced his transfer, the Count Uncle, was dead, not to mention the greater need for nurses than politicians, his request was granted without objection. He came to Milan immediately, entered the lazaretto, and had already been there for about three months.

Renzo's relief at finding the good friar did not last long, however, for in the very moment that he verified it was him, he could not help but notice how much he had changed. His posture was stooped and stiff, his face gaunt and pale. He seemed utterly exhausted, his flesh broken and failing, as if the only thing holding him up was sheer willpower.

He stared at the young man who was coming toward him, who was using gestures to stand out and be recognized, since he dared not speak. "Oh, Pádre Cristoforo!" Renzo said, when he was close enough to be heard without raising his voice.

"You? Here?" asked the friar, placing his bowl on the ground and standing up.

"How are you, Padre? How are you feeling?"

"Better than many of the poor souls you see here," answered the friar. His voice was faint, somber, altered like every other aspect of him. Only his eyes were the same as before, if not even brighter and livelier. It was as if charity, sublimated by this extreme sacrifice, and rejoicing to feel so close to its maker, had given him a purer and more ardent flame than the one that his illness was slowly extinguishing.

"But you," he continued, "how is it that you're here? Why have you come to face the plague like this?"

"I've already had it, thank heavens. I've come looking for . . . Lucia."

"Lucia? Is Lucia here?"

"She is. At least I hope to God that she still is."

"Is she your wife now?"

"Oh, dear Padre! No, she's not my wife. You know nothing about what happened to us?"

"No, my son. Ever since God separated me from you, I haven't heard anything. But now that He has sent you to me, I really would like to know. But . . . I thought you'd been banished?"

"So, you do know the things they did to me."

"But you, what did you do?"

"Well, if I said that I showed good judgment that day in Milan, I would be lying, but I did not do anything wrong."

"I believe you now, and I did before."

"Then I can tell you everything."

"Wait," said the friar, and taking a few steps outside the hut, he called, "Padre Vittore!" A few seconds later a young Capuchin appeared, whom he asked, "Can you do me a favor, Padre, and keep an eye on these poor children while I step out for a second? If anyone asks for me, please let me know. Especially that one over there! If he shows even the smallest sign of reviving, come fetch me immediately, please."

"Don't worry, I will," replied the young man. And the older man, turning to Renzo, said, "let's go in here. But," he added immediately, stopping, "you look tired to me: I'm sure you need something to eat."

"You're right," said Renzo, "now that you mention it, I realize I haven't eaten all day."

"Just a minute," said the friar. He fetched another bowl and went to the kettle to fill it. He came back and handed it to Renzo together with a spoon. He invited the boy to sit down on the pallet that served as his bed. Then he went to a cask in the corner, drew a glass of wine, and placed it on the little table in front of his guest. Finally, he picked up his own bowl and sat down next to him.

"Oh, Padre Cristoforo!" Renzo said, "You didn't have to go to such trouble. You are still the same kind man. I thank you with all my heart."

"Don't thank me," said the friar, "this is food for the poor. But today you are one of them, too. Now tell me everything I don't know. Tell me about our poor little girl, and try to be quick about it. We haven't got much time, and we have a lot to do, as you can see."

Between one spoonful and the next, Renzo started to tell the story of Lucia, how she had taken refuge at the convent in Monza, and how she had been abducted . . . At the picture of such suffering and such danger, at the thought that he had been the one to direct the poor innocent creature to that place, the good friar gasped. But he started to breathe easier as he listened to the amazing story of how she had been freed and returned to her mother, who had found her a situation with Donna Prassede.

"Now I'll tell you about me," continued Renzo. And he spoke very briefly about that day in Milan, the escape, and how he had been forced to live far from Pescarenico, and then how, with the world turned upside down, he decided to take the risk and come back home. How Agnese had not been there, and how in Milan he had learned that Lucia was at the lazaretto. "And here I am," he concluded, "I'm here to look for her, to see if she's alive, and if . . . she still wants me . . . because . . . sometimes . . ."

"But do you have any clue where they've put her?" asked the friar, "Or when she arrived?"

"No, Padre. I know nothing except that she's here, if she is still here, I pray to God!"

"You poor boy! Where have you looked so far?"

"I've gone around and around, but so far, I've only seen men. I figured the women must be in a separate area, but I've never managed to get there. If that's true, can you show me where it is?"

"Don't you know, my child, that men aren't allowed in unless they have a job there?"

"Well, what would happen to me if I went there anyway?"

"The rules are fair and sacrosanct, my son. And even though the number and gravity of the problems make it difficult to observe them strictly, it still doesn't mean that an honest man should disobey them."

"But, Padre Cristoforo," said Renzo, "Lucia should have been my wife. You know how we were separated. For twenty months now I've suffered, and I'm a patient man. I've come this far, taking many risks, each one worse than the last, and now . . ."

"I don't know what to say," continued the friar, responding more to his own thoughts than to Renzo's words. "You clearly have the best intentions, and God would be pleased if everyone who enters that area behaved as I trust you will. That same God certainly blesses you for how you have persevered in your love, and how faithful you have been in your desire and search for the woman whom He has destined for you. God is stricter than any man, but also more indulgent, and I believe He will forgive you for the unusual methods you have to use to find her. Just remember that both you and I will have to answer for how you behave once you get there: answer not so much to men, but certainly to God. Come." At this he stood, and so did Renzo. The boy heeded his words, but he had also decided, in the meantime, to abandon his earlier plan to bring up Lucia's vow. "If he hears that, too," he thought, "he'll definitely make things harder for me. Either I find her, and we'll have time to talk about it later. Or . . . and in that case, what will it matter?"

As they walked to the door of the hut, which faced north, the friar continued, "Listen carefully. Padre Felice, the president of the lazaretto, is taking the few people who have recovered to finish their quarantine somewhere else. Do you see the church there in the middle . . . ?" Raising his shaky, bony hand, he pointed left, through the murky air, at the dome of the chapel, which towered over the miserable tents. "They will be assembling there now, and then leaving in a procession by the same gate through which you must have entered."

"Ah! So that's why they were clearing the path."

"Yes. And you must have also heard the bell ring?"

"I heard it ring once."

"That was the second bell. By the time the third bell rings, everyone will have gathered. Padre Felice will make a short speech,

and then they will head out with him. At the third bell, join them. Try to slip behind the crowd and stand to one side of the path where you can watch them pass without disturbing anyone or being noticed. And you can see . . . you can see . . . if she is among them. If God did not wish for her to be among them, then"—and he raised his hand again, pointing to the side of the building opposite them—"over there, that part of the building and some of the yard in front is assigned to women. You'll see a fence dividing this section from that, but in some places there are gaps or openings, so it won't be hard for you to slip through. Once you're inside, if you don't do anything to arouse suspicion, it's likely no one will speak to you. But if you do run into any obstacle, just say that Padre Cristoforo from *** knows you and will answer for you. Look for her there. Look for her with faith and . . . resignation. Because, remember, you have come here searching for no small thing: You are looking for a living person in the lazaretto! Do you know how often I've seen my poor charges replaced by newcomers? How many I've seen carried away? How few have walked away on their own two feet? . . . Prepare yourself to make a sacrifice . . ."

"Yes, I understand," Renzo interrupted, his eyes clouding over and his expression changing. "I understand! I'm going: I'll look, I'll search in one place, then another, through the whole lazaretto, high and low . . . and if I don't find her . . ."

"If you don't find her?" asked the friar with a solemn, expectant air, and a look of warning.

That suggestion of doubt rekindled Renzo's anger and extinguished the light in his eyes. "If I don't find her, then there's someone else I will try to find. Whether in Milan, in his evil palace, at the ends of the earth, or in the devil's lair, I'll find the rat who tore us apart! If it hadn't been for that scoundrel, then Lucia would have been my wife these twenty months. And if it had been our destiny to die, then at least we would have died together. If he's still alive, I'll find him . . ."

"Renzo!" said the friar, grabbing him by the arm and giving him a severe look.

"And if I find him," Renzo went on, blinded by rage, "if the plague hasn't already brought him to justice . . . The days are long past when a ne'er-do-well, guarded by his bravi, can drive people to despair and laugh it off. The time has come for men to meet face-to-face. And . . . I'll take justice into my own hands!"

"Shame on you!" thundered Padre Cristoforo, his voice regaining all its former power and sound. "Shame on you!" His head rose up from his chest and his cheeks colored with their former vitality. The fire in his eyes was terrifying.

"Look around you!" With one hand, he grabbed Renzo's arm and forcefully shook it, while sweeping the other over the vast scene of pain and suffering before them. "Look around you! It is He who castigates! He who judges but shall not be judged! Who punishes and forgives! But you, you worm crawling on the earth, you would take justice into your own hands? Do you even know what justice is? Go, you disgrace, leave this place! I had hoped . . . yes, I had hoped that before I die, God would have given me the consolation of hearing that my poor Lucia was alive. To perhaps see her, and hear her promise that she would say a prayer for me, over there, by the common grave where I will soon be buried. But now you have robbed me of that hope. God did not leave her on this earth for you. And clearly you do not have the audacity to think yourself worthy of God's consolation. But He will have thought of her, because she is one of those souls for whom eternal consolation is reserved. Go now, I have no more time to waste on you."

At this he pushed Renzo's arm away and started to head toward one of the huts of the sick.

"Padre!" Renzo said, chasing after him with an imploring gesture. "Would you send me away like this?"

"What!" the Capuchin replied in an equally stern voice. "Do you dare expect me to take time away from the afflicted, who are waiting for me to speak to them of God's forgiveness, to listen to your words of rage, your plans for revenge? I listened to you when you asked for consolation and help, and for the sake of charity I interrupted my charitable work. But now you are set on revenge, so what

do you want from me? Go. I have seen victims die here with words of forgiveness on their lips. And I have seen persecutors who grieved that they could not beg their victims for forgiveness. I have wept with both. But what shall I do with you?"

"I forgive him! I really do forgive him! I forgive him for all time!" exclaimed the youth.

"Renzo," the friar said in a grave but calmer voice, "think for a minute, and tell me how many times you have forgiven him."

Minutes went by without an answer. Padre Cristoforo suddenly lowered his head, and in a slow somber voice, continued what he had been saying, "You know the reason I donned this habit."

Renzo hesitated.

"You know!" the old man repeated.

"I know," replied Renzo.

"I, too, have hated. I, who reprimanded you for a thought, for a word, when the man whom I hated with all my heart, whom I hated for so long, is a man whom I murdered."

"Yes, but he was a bully, one of those . . ."

"Silence!" the friar interrupted him. "If there had been a good reason, do you really think I would have spent thirty years trying to find it? Ah, if I could only make you feel in your heart what I have felt ever since that day, and still feel today, for the man whom I hated! If only I could! Perhaps I cannot, but God can: I pray that He will do it! . . . Listen, Renzo. He loves you better than you love yourself. You might have plotted your revenge, but He has the strength and the mercy to prevent you from carrying it out. He is granting you the grace that someone else did not deserve. You know, and you have said many times, that He can stay the hand of a bully. But He can also stay the hand of an avenger. Do you think that because you are poor, because you are offended, He cannot defend you from a man created in His own image? Do you really think He will allow you to do whatever you want? No! But do you know what you can do? You can hate, and be lost. You can, by embracing one feeling, cast yourself beyond the blessing of God. Because no matter what happens, no matter what fortune may hold for you, you can be sure

that punishment certainly lies ahead, until your forgiveness is so true that you will never again have to say, 'I forgive him.'"

"Yes, yes," said Renzo, overcome by emotion, by confusion. "I know now that I never really have forgiven him. I know now that I have spoken like an animal and not a Christian. And now, by the grace of our Lord, yes, I forgive him with all my heart."

"And if you were to see him?"

"I would pray to God to give me patience and to touch his heart."

"Would you remember that God did not tell us to forgive our enemies, but to love them? Would you remember that He loved him so much that He died for him?"

"Yes, with your help I would."

"Good, then come with me. You said, 'I'll find him,' and you will. Come, and you'll see the man you so hated, whom you could and would have harmed, whose life you wanted to take."

Taking Renzo's hand, and gripping it as firmly as a healthy young man, he started on his way. And Renzo followed, afraid to ask anything more.

After a few steps, the friar stopped near the opening of a hut, stared at Renzo with a mix of gravity and tenderness, and led him inside.

The first thing Renzo saw as he entered was a sick man sitting on a pile of straw; a man who was not gravely ill, and who indeed appeared to be on the verge of recovery. When the man saw Padre Cristoforo, he shook his head, as if to say no. The friar lowered his head with sadness and resignation. Renzo, in the meantime, was looking around with restless curiosity, when he noticed three or four sick men, one of whom was on a mattress off to the side, wrapped in a bedsheet, and using a nobleman's cloak as a blanket. He stared at him more closely. It was Don Rodrigo. Renzo took a step back, but with a firm grip the friar drew him to the edge of that dirty heap and, with his other hand, pointed at the man lying on top of it.

There lay the unhappy man, unresponsive. His eyes were wide open but vacant, his face pale and covered with black lesions, his

lips black and swollen. You would have thought it was the face of a corpse, but every so often, his body would convulse violently, revealing the stubborn life still inside. His chest lifted every so often in labored breathing. His right hand, uncovered, was pressed to his heart; his fingers, covered with lesions and black at the tips, curled inward like a claw.

"Do you see!" said the friar in a soft and solemn voice. "It may be punishment, or it may be mercy. What you feel now for this man who offended you is the same feeling that God—whom you, too, have offended—will have for you on the day of judgment. Bless him, and you shall be blessed. He has been like this for four days, showing no signs of life. Perhaps God is ready to grant him his hour of absolution, but He wanted to hear you pray for it. Perhaps He wants both you and that innocent girl to pray for it. Or perhaps He is withholding grace until He hears your prayer, the prayer of a heart that is afflicted and resigned. Perhaps both this man's salvation and your own depend on your capacity for forgiveness, for compassion . . . for love!"

He fell silent and, joining his hands together, bowed his head and prayed. Renzo did the same.

They had been in this posture for a few moments when the bell started tolling. Both friar and youth moved, as if in concert, and went out. One of them asked no questions. The other made no protests. Their faces spoke for them.

"Go now," said the friar, "go prepared to receive grace or to make a sacrifice. To praise God whatever the outcome of your search may be. And whatever it may be, come to inform me, and we will praise him together."

Without another word, they separated. One went back inside. The other headed to the chapel, which was no more than a hundred yards away.

Chapter 36

Who would have told Renzo, a few hours earlier, as his search neared its end and his moments of greatest doubt and decision began, that his heart would be torn between Lucia and Don Rodrigo? And yet, so it was. On that short walk, the figure of Don Rodrigo blended in with all the cherished or terrifying images that hope or fear had set before him. The words he had heard by that dismal bed were caught between the yeses and noes at war within his mind. As he prayed for a happy end to his great ordeal, he also added the prayers he had recited over the dying man before the tolling of the bell had cut them short.

The octagonal chapel stood in the middle of the lazaretto, elevated by a short set of steps. Originally, it was open on all sides, with no walls or support other than pillars and columns: a perforated structure, in other words. On every side there was an arch between two columns. On the inside, the church proper was surrounded by a gallery of eight arches, one for each side, and topped by a cupola, making the central altar visible from every window of the surrounding buildings and almost every point in the yard. Today, the building has been converted for other uses and the once-open façades have been walled in, but the original framework has remained intact, clearly indicating its former appearance and purpose.

Renzo had just started walking in that direction when he saw Padre Felice appear in the portico of the chapel and stand beneath the middle arch of the side that faced the city. A group had congregated before him in the central pathway, at the foot of the steps.

From the friar's posture Renzo could already see that the sermon had begun.

Renzo made his way through the pathways to the back of the crowd, as he had been instructed. There he stopped, quiet as a mouse, and surveyed the assembly. All he could see from that point, however, was an expanse of heads, pressed together like cobblestones. Some in the middle were covered with kerchiefs or veils: This is where he stared most intently. Unable to discover anything in the crowd, he looked up to where everyone was staring. The venerable figure of the preacher humbled and moved him, and, with all the attention he could spare at a moment of such great expectation, Renzo began to listen to his sermon:

"Let us pause to consider the thousands upon thousands who departed in that direction." The preacher pointed over his shoulder to the gate leading to the San Gregorio cemetery, which had been turned into a vast common grave in those days. "Let us look around at the thousands upon thousands who remain here, still uncertain of how they will leave. Let us look at ourselves, the few of us who are departing from here alive. Blessed be the Lord! Blessed in justice, and blessed in mercy! Blessed in death, and blessed in health! Blessed in His having chosen us! Oh, why did He choose us, my children, if not to set aside a small population for Himself, redeemed through affliction and inspired by gratitude? If not so that we would feel more profoundly that life is a gift from Him, and that we should cherish it as we should all things that He has given, and express our gratitude through good deeds that we can offer up to Him? If not so that the memory of our hardships would make us more compassionate and helpful to our fellow man? Those who have suffered, hoped, and feared alongside us, whom we leave behind as friends and relations, brothers and sisters. For those who watch us leave this place, may they be edified by our composure, while taking solace in the thought that some of us have departed from here alive. God does not want them to see us erupt in a loud, worldly joy at our escape from the death with which they still wres-

tle. Let them see us leave filled with gratitude for ourselves and prayers for them, so that they may know we shall continue to pray for their pour souls once we are outside. As we take our first steps in this journey, may we begin a life filled with charity. May those who have regained their former strength lend a fraternal arm to the weak. May the young support the old. May those of you who have lost your own children see the children all around you who have lost their parents. Become parents to them! And this charity, by redeeming your sins, will also ease your pain."

A dull murmur of groans and sobs that had been swelling within the assembly suddenly fell silent when the preacher placed a rope around his neck and dropped to his knees. The crowd waited quietly to hear what he was about to say.

"For myself," he began, "and for all my brothers, who, through no merit of our own were chosen for the great privilege of serving Christ by serving you, I humbly beg for your forgiveness if we have proven unworthy of this great mission. If sloth, the rebellion of the flesh, has made us less attentive, less responsive to your needs; if an unjust impatience, a sinful weariness, has made us appear before you looking irritated or severe; if the desperation of your need kept us from treating you with the proper humility at times; if our frailty has led us to do things that upset you, please forgive us. By the same token shall God forgive your trespasses, and bless you." Making the sign of the cross over the congregation, he then stood up.

I have been able to report if not the exact words that he spoke, then at the least their sense and theme, although I cannot describe the manner in which he said them. It was the manner of a man who said it was a privilege to serve the plague victims, because that is what he believed it to be; who confessed that he was unworthy, because he truly felt he was; and who begged for forgiveness, because he was convinced that he needed it. But what about the people who had seen the Capuchins dedicate themselves wholly to serving others and seen so many die; who had watched this man who spoke on their behalf, always the first in his labors and first in authority, until he himself was at death's door? Can you imagine the sobs, the tears,

with which they responded to his words? The admirable friar then took a large cross that was leaning against a pillar and raised it high. Leaving his sandals on the edge of the outer gallery, he descended the steps and began to make his way through the crowd, which parted respectfully to allow him to lead the procession.

Renzo's eyes filled with tears, as if he himself had been asked to bestow that singular forgiveness. He stepped to one side along with the others and hid by a hut, waiting, with his body in the shadows and his head sticking out, his eyes wide open and his heart racing, but also with a special newfound confidence born, I believe, from the tenderness inspired in him by that sermon, and the sight of tenderness all around.

Now came Padre Felice, barefoot, with the rope around his neck and bearing the large heavy cross. His face was gaunt and pale, radiating both contrition and courage. He walked slowly but resolutely, like a man whose only thought was to help the weak, and who had found the strength, through hard work and discomfort, to shoulder the rigors required by and inseparable from his job. Immediately after him came the older children: Many had no shoes, while most were not fully clothed, some in only a shirt. Then came the women, almost all of whom were holding a girl by the hand and singing the *Miserere* in rounds. The feeble sound of their voices, the pallor and languor of their faces, inspired compassion in anyone who found themselves there as a simple spectator.

Renzo looked closely from row to row, face to face, skipping none. The procession was moving slowly, so he had ample time to examine every woman who passed. They kept coming and coming. He kept looking and looking, but always in vain. He gave a rapid glance at the remaining rows: By now very few are left. Here comes the last row. All the women have passed by. All had the faces of strangers. His arms hanging and his head leaning to one side, he followed with his eyes the last row of women before the men's group began to pass by. At the appearance of a few carts trailing behind, bearing convalescents still too frail to walk, his attention and his hopes revived. The women were in the last carts of the pro-

cession, which was moving so slowly that Renzo was able to examine every single face. To no avail. He examined the first cart, then the second, and the third, always with the same result, until the last passed him, followed only by another stern-looking Capuchin holding a stick, the group supervisor. It was Padre Michele who, as I have mentioned, shared the leadership of the lazaretto with Padre Felice.

With that, Renzo's cherished hope vanished, taking with it not only the comfort it had afforded but, as is generally the case, leaving him in worse shape than before. The best he could hope for now was to find Lucia in a sickbed. Yet as the ardor of his hope succumbed to growing fear, the poor boy clung with all his strength to that sad and feeble thread. He fell into line and walked toward the place where the procession had begun. At the foot of the chapel, he knelt on the bottom step, where he said a prayer to God, or rather a jumble of muddled words, broken sentences, exclamations, questions, complaints, and promises. It was one of those speeches not meant for the ears of men, since they have neither the insight to understand nor the patience to listen to them. They are not big enough to feel compassion for such words without contempt.

He stood up, revived. He walked around the chapel, and found himself on a path he hadn't noticed before that led to the other gate. A few steps away, he saw the fence the friar had mentioned, and its large gaps exactly as had been described. He passed through one of them and found himself in the women's quarter. Almost immediately, he spotted a small bell on the ground, the kind the monatti wore on their feet, and realized it could serve as his passport inside this area. He picked it up, making sure no one was looking, and tied it to his ankle the way that they did. Then he set out on his search, a search that would have already been arduous because of the sheer number of objects, even if they had been another type of object altogether. He began to survey or rather contemplate new miseries, similar to yet so unlike the ones he had already witnessed. Although everyone was suffering from the same calamity, here there was a different suffering, a different languishing, and a

different moaning, as well as a different form of mutual support, pity and assistance. And the observer felt a different sympathy and revulsion.

He had already been walking for quite a while without incident or results, when he heard someone behind him say, "You, over there!" apparently directed at him. He turned and saw a commissioner in the distance raise a hand, point straight at him, and shout, "They need help over there, in the rooms. We're done cleaning."

Renzo immediately realized for whom he'd been mistaken, and that the bell was the reason for the confusion. He cursed himself for thinking only about how this identifier would prevent problems, and not how it could invite them. But how could he handle this man? He nodded quickly at the commissioner, as if to indicate that he'd understood and would obey the order, and then disappeared from his sight, slipping off between the huts to one side.

When he felt far enough away, he decided to get rid of the source of attention. To avoid being noticed, he squeezed into a narrow space between two huts standing back-to-back. He crouched down to untie the bell, his head leaning against the straw wall of one hut, when he heard a soft voice coming from within. Good Lord! Could it be? He held his breath, and listened as if his life depended on it . . . Yes! Yes! It was her voice! . . . "Afraid of what?" she said softly. "We've been through something much worse than a storm. The people who have taken care of us so far will continue to do so."

Renzo didn't let out a shout, but not because he feared discovery. He couldn't breathe. His knees buckled and his eyesight clouded over, but only for a moment. In the next, he was back on his feet and fully alert, more vigorous than before. In a hop, skip, and a jump, he circled the hut and stood at the door. He peered at the woman who had been speaking as she leaned over a cot. She turned around at the sound of someone at the door. She looked and couldn't believe her eyes. Was she dreaming? She looked more closely. "Oh my Lord!" she cried.

"Lucia, I've found you! You're here! It really is you! You're alive!" exclaimed Renzo as he stepped forward, trembling all over.

"Oh my Lord," replied Lucia, trembling even more. "Renzo? What is this? How? Why? But the plague!"

"I've had it already. And you . . . ?"

"Ah . . . me, too. And my mother?"

"I haven't seen her since she moved to Pasturo, but I hear she's well. But you . . . you're so pale! You look so weak! Are you really better?"

"The Lord has decided to keep me here on earth a little while longer. Oh, Renzo! Why did you come here?"

"Why did I come here?" said Renzo, approaching even closer. "You're asking why I came? Do I have to tell you? Am I not Renzo? Are you not Lucia?"

"What are you saying? What are you saying? Didn't my mother get someone to write to you?"

"Yes, unfortunately she did. What kind of thing was that to write to someone down on his luck, a boy in trouble, driven from his home, a boy who at the very least has always respected you."

"But, Renzo! Renzo! Since you already knew . . . why did you come? Why?"

"Why did I come? Oh, Lucia, how can you even ask why I came? After all our promises? Are we no longer ourselves? Do you no longer remember what we were denied?"

"Oh Lord!" exclaimed Lucia in anguish, clasping her hands together and looking up at the sky. "Why did you not grant me the grace of taking me to heaven . . . ? Oh, Renzo! What have you done? Just when I was starting to hope that . . . with time . . . I would forget . . ."

"You call that hope? And you say it to my face?"

"Ah, what have you done? And in this place! Surrounded by this misery! By these sights! Here, where people come to die! How could you?"

"The dying? All we can do is pray to God for them, and hope they'll go to a better place. But that's no reason, no, not even that, for the living to lead lives of despair . . ."

"But, Renzo, Renzo! Think of what you're saying. I made a vow to the Blessed Virgin! . . . A vow!"

"And I'm telling you that some vows don't count."

"Oh Lord! What are you saying? Where have you been? Who has filled your head with these thoughts? Why are you speaking this way?"

"I'm speaking like a good Christian! As for the Blessed Virgin, I think I know her better than you do. Because I think she has no desire for vows that hurt your fellow man. If the Virgin had actually spoken, that would have been a different matter. But it's all in your imagination. Let me tell you the vow you should make to Her. Vow that you will name our first daughter after her, Maria. I can make that vow, too. That's how you're supposed to honor the Virgin. Devotions like that make more sense, and they don't hurt anyone."

"How can you say that? You don't know what you're saying! You don't know what it means to make a vow, Renzo. You weren't the one in that situation. You don't know what it was like, Renzo! Go. Go now, for the love of heaven."

She broke away from him in a fury, returning to her cot.

"Lucia!" said Renzo, without moving. "At least tell me, tell me, if it weren't for that vow . . . would you still be mine?"

"You have no heart!" replied Lucia, turning away from him and struggling to hold back the tears. "You'd force me to say words that won't do any good? Words that might be sinful and could put me in harm's way? Would that make you happy? Go now, please go! Forget me. You can see that we are not destined to be together. We shall meet again in heaven, for our time on earth is so short. Go. Try to let my mother know that I've recovered. God has always helped me, even here, and I have found a good soul here, this kind woman, who is like a mother to me. Tell her that I hope she will be spared from this disease, and that we will see each other again when and where God wishes . . . Go now, for the love of heaven, and don't think about me . . . except when you are praying to God."

She drew even closer to the woman's bed, as if shielding herself

from danger, like someone with nothing left to say and nothing more she wanted to hear.

"Listen to me, Lucia, listen to me!" cried Renzo, but did not move any closer.

"No, go now, for mercy's sake!"

"Listen to me. Padre Cristoforo . . ."

"What?"

"He's here."

"Here? Where? How do you know?"

"I spoke with him a little while ago. I spent some time with him. And a priest of his quality, I think . . ."

"He's here? To help the poor plague victims, I'm sure. But what about him? Has he had the plague?"

"Ah, Lucia! I'm afraid, I'm afraid that, unfortunately . . ." As Renzo hesitated to deliver the news that pained him, and would pain Lucia even more, she stepped away from the cot and came closer to him. "I'm afraid that he has it now!"

"That poor saint of a man! But not just the poor man. Poor us! How is he? Is he in bed? Is someone taking care of him?"

"He's up and about, helping others. But if you saw him, how pale he is, how he struggles to stay on his feet! There have been so many who look that way, so many, unfortunately . . . there's no mistaking it!"

"Oh, poor us! To think that he's right here!"

"Only a few feet away. Almost the same distance as from your house to mine . . . if you remember!"

"Oh Blessed Virgin!"

"Not much farther than that. And to think that we talked about you! He told me some things . . . if you only knew what he showed me! You will hear. But now I want to tell you what he said earlier, his exact words. He told me that I was right to come looking for you, and that it pleases God for a young man to act this way, so God would help me find you. And he was right. He truly is a saint. Don't you see?"

"But if he said that it's only because he doesn't know . . ."

"How can you expect him to know the things you did on your own, without following any rules or anyone's advice? A good, sensible man like him would never have expected that. But you should have seen what he showed me!" Then he told her about their visit to that hut. In the time she had spent at the lazaretto, Lucia's heart and senses had hardened, and grown used to the most ghastly sights. Still she was filled with horror and compassion by the story he told her.

"And there, too," continued Renzo, "he spoke like a saint. He said that maybe God wished to deliver grace to that poor wretch (what else could I call him now?), that He is waiting to take him at the right moment. But he wants us to pray for him together . . . Together! Do you understand?"

"Yes, yes, we'll pray for him, each of us where God has placed us. For He will know how to unite our prayers."

"But I'm telling you his exact words . . . !"

"But, Renzo, he doesn't know . . ."

"Don't you understand that when a saint speaks, God speaks through him? That Padre Cristoforo would never have said that if it wasn't so? And what about that poor man's soul? I really did pray for him, and I will keep praying. I prayed from my heart, as if he were my brother. But how do you think he will fare up there in heaven, poor man, if you and I don't repair things between us, and right the wrong that he committed? If you listen to reason, then everything will go back to the way it was supposed to be. What's past is past. He has paid his debt down here . . ."

"No, Renzo, no. God does not want us to do wrong for the sake of His mercy. Let us leave this matter in His hands: Our only duty is to pray. If I had died that night, does that mean that Don Rodrigo might never have been forgiven? And since I did not die, and I was released . . ."

"And your mother? Poor Agnese, who has always loved me, and who suffered so much to see us become husband and wife, didn't

she also tell you that you were wrong? She's made you listen to reason other times, too, because, sometimes, she has more sense than you."

"My mother? You want my mother to advise me to break a vow? Renzo, you're not yourself!"

"Do you really want to know? The two of you, you don't know everything! Fra Cristoforo told me I should go back to him and let him know whether I'd found you. I'll go now. Let's hear what he has to say. I think he's going to say . . ."

"Yes, go to that holy man. Tell him that I pray for him, and that he should pray for me. I need his prayers. I need them so much! But for the love of heaven, for the sake of your soul, of my soul, don't come back here again to hurt me, to . . . tempt me. Fra Cristoforo will explain it to you, and make you come to your senses. He'll set your heart at peace."

"My heart at peace? Well, you can forget about that! First you had that awful letter sent to me. Do you have any idea how much that hurt me? And now you have the heart to say the same thing in person? Let me tell you loud and clear that I will never set my heart at peace. Maybe you want to forget me. But I don't want to forget you. And I promise that if you make me lose my senses, I'll never get them back. To hell with my job, to hell with good behavior! You want to condemn me to a lifetime of anger? Very well, then. I'll live as an angry man . . . And that scoundrel! God knows I forgave him from my heart, but you . . . Do you really want me to spend the rest of my life believing that if it hadn't been for him . . . ? Lucia! You told me to forget you. Forget you! How am I supposed to do that? Who do you think I've been thinking of this whole time? And after all that's happened! After all our promises! Is there something I did to you after we said goodbye? Are you treating me this way because I suffered? Because I got into trouble? Because I was a wanted man? Because I've been homeless and sad and far away from you for so long? Because I came back to look for you as soon as I could?"

When Lucia was finally able to speak through her tears, she clasped her hands, raised her reddened eyes to the heavens, and

exclaimed, "Oh Blessed Virgin, help me! You know that ever since that night, I have never lived through another moment like this. You helped me then. Help me now!"

"Yes, Lucia, go ahead and invoke the Madonna. But how can you believe that the mother of mercy, a person so good, would want us, or at least me, to suffer . . . all because of a word you let slip at a moment when you didn't know what you were saying? Do you really believe that she helped you then only to leave us in this tangled mess now? Or is this just an excuse, and you've come to hate me? Tell me. Tell me the truth."

"Please, Renzo, please, for the love of your dearly departed, stop. You're killing me . . . This is not my time. Go to Padre Cristoforo. Give him my regards, and don't come back here ever again."

"I'm leaving. But don't think I won't be back. I'd come back here if this were the ends of the earth." With that he left.

Lucia sat or rather sank to the floor next to the cot. Leaning her head against it, she continued to sob uncontrollably. Her companion, who until that moment had been holding her breath, but watching and listening intently, wondered at the meaning of that apparition, that quarrel, that weeping. The reader must be wondering who she might be. Once again, it will only take a few words to satisfy your curiosity.

She was the wealthy widow of a merchant, perhaps in her thirties. In the space of a few days, she had watched her husband and all of her children die at home. It was not long before she came down with the plague herself. She was taken to the lazaretto and placed in the same hut as Lucia, who was just starting to regain her strength and consciousness after surviving the worst of the disease, unaware of the series of roommates who had come through her quarters. She had become ill when she was still at the house of Don Ferrante and had been unconscious ever since. The hut was only big enough for two, and they struck up an intimacy, and bonded in their sickness, abandonment, and isolation among the multitudes; very soon, it was as if they had been living together for years. Lucia was soon able to help her companion, who was extremely ill. Now that she,

too, was out of danger, they kept each other company and kept up each other's spirits. They had promised not to leave the lazaretto unless they could go together, and remain together afterward. The widow had left her home, shop, and coffers—all well-stocked—in the care of her brother, a commissioner on the Tribunal of Health. She was about to become the sad and lonely mistress of far more wealth than she needed to live comfortably, and she wanted to keep Lucia by her side, as a daughter or sister. Lucia had agreed, grateful to her and to Providence, but not until she received news from her mother, and learned, she hoped, of her approval. Since Lucia was reserved by nature, she had never uttered a word about her engagement or any of her extraordinary adventures. But now, with such a great reawakening of emotions, her desire to pour out her heart matched her companion's desire to listen. Holding the widow's right hand, Lucia immediately set about answering her questions, with no restraint other than her sobs.

Meanwhile Renzo was hurrying off to the good friar's quarters. After some difficulty and retracing his steps a few times over, he finally managed to make it back. He found the hut but not the man. After circling and searching the area, he saw him in a shack, leaning almost prone over the ground to comfort a dying man. Renzo stood there, waiting in silence. Soon after, he saw the friar close the poor man's eyes, get down on his knees, and say a short prayer. When he stood back up, Renzo went up to him.

"Oh," Fra Cristoforo said, seeing him come, "well?"

"She's here! I found her!"

"In what condition?"

"She's recovered, or at least she's on her feet."

"Praise God!"

"But," said Renzo, when he was close enough to whisper, "there's another complication."

"Tell me."

"What I mean to say is . . . You know how good she is, but sometimes Lucia can be a little stubborn. After all our promises, after all that we've been through—which you know about—now she says

she can't marry me. She says—what do I know?—that on that awful night, she lost her mind and—how can I put this—made a vow to the Virgin. It makes no sense! It would be a good thing for someone who knows these things, and understands when to make a vow, but for us common people, who don't know how to go about it . . . Can that vow really be valid?"

"Tell me, is she far from here?"

"No, a short ways from the other side of the church."

"Give me a minute," said the friar, "and we'll go there together."

"Do you mean that you'll make her understand . . ."

"I don't know, my son. I have to hear from her first."

"I see," said Renzo. He stood there, staring at the ground with his arms folded over his chest, still ruminating over the same uncertainties. The friar went in search of Padre Vittore, and asked him to cover for him one more time. He went into his hut, came out with his bag on his arm, and returning to Renzo, said, "Let's go." Fra Cristoforo went first, heading toward the same hut that they had entered together a little while earlier. This time he entered alone. A moment later he reappeared, saying, "All we can do is pray." And then, "Now lead the way."

Without another word, they set out.

The sky was growing darker, heralding the imminent storm. Sharp bolts of lightning pierced the spreading darkness, casting a harsh bright light on the long roofs and arches of the galleries, the cupola of the chapel, and the squat chimneys of the huts. Peals of thunder broke with a loud boom, echoing from one region of the sky to the next. The young man pressed on, impatient to get there, paying close attention to the path. He walked slowly, however, so that his companion could keep up with him. Exhausted by his labors, aggravated by illness, and oppressed by the muggy air, Padre Cristoforo was struggling to walk, and kept raising his gaunt face to the sky as if to catch his breath.

When Renzo saw the hut, he stopped, turned around, and in a trembling voice said, "We're here."

They went in. "They've come!" cried the woman from the cot.

Lucia turned, leapt to her feet, and went toward the old man crying, "I can't believe my eyes! Oh, Padre Cristoforo!"

"Ah, Lucia. The Lord has delivered you from so much torment! How glad you must be to have always placed your hopes in Him."

"Oh, yes. But you, Padre? Goodness gracious, how you've changed! How are you feeling? Tell me: How are you?"

"As God wishes, and as, by His grace, I wish to be, too," replied the friar serenely. Drawing her to the side, he added, "Listen. I only have a few minutes. Are you ready to confide in me, as you have other times?"

"You are still my father confessor, aren't you?"

"So, my daughter, what is this Renzo tells me about a vow?"

"At a moment of great tribulation, I made a vow to the Virgin . . . to never marry."

"Poor girl! But did you not remember that you were already bound by another vow?"

"No, I didn't . . . but this was a vow to Our Lord, to the Blessed Virgin."

"The Lord, my daughter, appreciates sacrifices, offerings, when they affect us alone. When we make them from the heart, of our own free will. But you cannot offer up the free will of another, to whom you were already bound."

"Was I wrong?"

"No, poor girl, that's not what I'm saying. On the contrary, I am sure that the Blessed Virgin appreciated your tormented heart's intention, and offered it to God on your behalf. But tell me, did you ever seek anyone's advice on this matter?"

"I didn't think I had done something wrong or that I needed to confess. And aren't we supposed to keep quiet about the few good deeds we are able to do?"

"So there is nothing else preventing you from keeping your promise to Renzo?"

"I don't know . . . something preventing me . . . ? I couldn't really say . . ." Lucia replied with a hesitation that indicated anything but

uncertainty. Though her face was still pale from the illness, she suddenly turned bright red.

"Do you believe," the old man continued, lowering his eyes, "that God gave the Church the authority to remit or to retain the debts and obligations that people might have contracted with Him, depending on the greater good?"

"Yes, I do."

"Then you should know that those of us entrusted with the care of the soul have the broadest powers of the Church for all who come to us. Therefore, should you request it, I can release you from any obligation, whatever it might be, that you might have contracted through your vow."

"But isn't it a sin to go back on, to repent a vow made to the Virgin? At the time I made it with all my heart . . ." said Lucia, shaken violently by the power of an unexpected feeling that I can only call hope, and by the opposing force of terror strengthened by all the thoughts over which she had for so long obsessed.

"A sin, my daughter?" said the friar. "A sin to turn to the Church, to ask its minister to use the authority the Church has given him, and that the Church has received from God? I have seen how the two of you were united. And if ever two people were united by God, it seemed to me that it was you. I do not see why God would want to keep you apart now. And I bless whoever it is that bestowed upon me the authority to speak on His behalf, however unworthy I may be, and allow you to take back your word. And if you ask me to release you from your vow, I will not hesitate to do so. And indeed I wish you would ask me."

"Then . . . then . . . I'm asking you," said Lucia, with a face now colored only by modesty.

The friar gestured to the young man, who was in the far corner, observing intently (since that's all he could do) a dialogue that would have a profound effect on him. When Renzo came closer, Padre Cristoforo said to Lucia in a loud voice, "With the authority granted to me by the Church, I hereby release you from your vow

of chastity, annulling that which might have been unadvised in it, and freeing you of any obligation you may have contracted thereby."

The reader can imagine how those words sounded to Renzo's ears. His eyes shone with gratitude for the man who had uttered them, and he instantly tried, and failed, to catch the eyes of Lucia.

"Return now, with peace and security, to your former concerns," the Capuchin went on to say. "Ask the Lord once again for the grace to be a good wife. And trust that he will grant you that grace in even greater abundance, after all that you have suffered. And you," he said, turning to Renzo, "remember, my son, that if the Church is offering you this companion, it is not to give you a temporal, earthly pleasure, which even if it could be whole and free of unhappiness, would still end in great sorrow the moment you leave each other. No, it is that the Church wishes to set you both on the road to eternal joy. Love each other as fellow travelers, with the thought that one day you will have to leave each other, and the hope that you will meet again in eternity. Thank the heavens for leading you to this condition, not through turbulent and fleeting joy, but through troubles and miseries, to prepare you for a serene and peaceful joy. If God should bless you with children, then try to raise them in His light, and instill in them the love of Him and of all humanity. And then guide them well in all else. Lucia, did he tell you"—and he pointed to Renzo—"who he saw here?"

"Oh, Padre, yes he did!"

"Pray for him! Never grow tired of doing so. And pray for me, too! My children! I want you to have something by which to remember this poor friar." At this he removed from his basket a box of ordinary wood, sanded and polished with Capuchin refinement. "This holds the remains of a crust of bread, the first piece of charity that I ever received. That bread you have heard me speak of before. I leave it with you. Conserve it. Show it to your children. They will grow up in a sad world and in sad times, surrounded by the proud and the irate. Tell them they must always forgive, and forgive everything. And that they, too, should pray for this poor friar."

He handed the box to Lucia, who accepted it respectfully, as if it

were a relic. Then, in a calmer voice, he asked, "Now tell me, who do you know in Milan? When you leave here, where will you stay? And who will take you to your mother, God bless and preserve her?"

"This good woman has been like a mother to me. The two of us will leave here together, and then she will take care of everything."

"God bless her," said the friar, coming next to the cot.

"I wish to thank you, too," said the widow, "for the joy you have brought to these poor children, although I had hoped to keep my dear Lucia with me always. But in the meantime, I will take care of her. I'll accompany her to her village and bring her to her mother." Then she added, in a whisper, "I want to provide for her trousseau. I have far too many things myself. And I don't have anyone else to enjoy them with anymore."

"In so doing," replied the friar, "you will make a great sacrifice to the Lord, and for the good of your fellow man. I have no need to recommend this girl to you. I already see that you treat her as if she were your own daughter. I can only praise the Lord, who is our father even in the midst of afflictions. By reuniting them, He has given a clear sign that He loves them both. Come now," he then said, turning to Renzo and taking him by the hand, "there's nothing left for the two of us to do here. We have already stayed too long. It's time for us to go."

"Oh, Padre!" said Lucia. "Will I see you again? I am better now, I, who has never done good in this world, while you . . ."

"For many years now," replied the old man in a solemn and gentle voice, "I have been asking the Lord for a favor, and for one great favor: to end my days in service to my fellow man. If he wishes to grant it to me now, then everyone who bears some love for me must help me to thank him. It is time for us to go. Now give Renzo any messages you may have for your mother."

"Tell her what you have seen," said Lucia to her fiancé, "that I have found a second mother here, that I will come to her as soon as I can, and that I hope, I pray, to find her healthy."

"If you need money," said Renzo, "I have everything that you sent me, and . . ."

"No, no," interrupted the widow, "I have more than enough."

"Time for us to go," repeated the friar.

"Goodbye, Lucia . . . ! And goodbye to you, too, kind woman," said Renzo, unable to find the words to express his feelings.

"Who knows whether the Lord will grant us the grace for us all to meet again!" exclaimed Lucia.

"May He always be with you, and bless you," Padre Cristoforo said to the two women, and he left the hut with Renzo.

Night was falling and the storm was about to break. The Capuchin renewed his invitation to the young man to spend the night in his hut. "I may not be able to keep you company," he added, "but at least you'll have a roof over your head."

Renzo was impatient to leave, however, and had no interest in staying there any longer if he could neither see Lucia nor pass some time with the good friar. The hour and weather did not matter to him; night and day, sun and rain, dawn and dusk, were all the same to him in that moment. So he thanked the friar, but said that he wanted to leave as soon as possible to go look for Agnese.

When they reached the middle path, the friar shook his hand and said, "If—by the will of God—you do find the good Agnese, please send her my respects. And tell her, and all those who are still in Pescarenico, to remember Fra Cristoforo. Tell them to pray for him. May God remain by your side, and always bless you!"

"Oh, dear Padre . . . ! Will we meet again? Will we?"

"Up in heaven, I hope." With these words, he took his leave of Renzo. The young man stood there watching him until he disappeared from sight, then he walked quickly to the gate, and cast a last compassionate glance around that place of sorrow. There was more movement than usual: monatti running, objects being carried, the entrances to huts being pulled shut, and convalescents shuffling to the huts and galleries, in search of shelter from the approaching storm.

Chapter 37

A slight drizzle began the moment Renzo crossed the threshold of the lazaretto and turned right, heading back toward the same alley that he had followed beneath the city walls that morning. A few impetuous drops drummed and bounced off the dry white road, raising a cloud of fine dust. A moment later, those drops became a shower, and before he could even reach the alley, the rain started coming down in torrents. But Renzo didn't mind. He splashed about, enjoying the refreshment as the green grass and leaves swooshed and hummed, trembling, dripping, shiny, and newly green. He took big deep breaths. And in this reprieve of nature, he felt more freely and vividly the positive turn his destiny had taken.

That feeling would have been even more pure and complete if Renzo had been able to guess that, only a few days later, the rain would wash away the contagion. After that downpour, although the lazaretto could not restore to the living all the lives it contained, it ceased to swallow any others. Within a week, homes and shops opened their doors, and talk of the quarantine quieted to a whisper. All that would remain of the plague were the occasional vestiges that a scourge always leaves in its wake.

And so our traveler went on his merry way, without worrying about where or how or when or even if he should stop to spend the night. His only concern was to keep moving and get home as quickly as possible, find someone with whom to speak, tell his story, and then set off immediately for Pasturo to find Agnese. As he walked his head was filled with the events of the day, but amid the miseries, the horrors, and the dangers a single thought floated to the top: "I

have found her! She has recovered! She is mine!" And then he would jump up and down, splashing water everywhere, like a poodle shaking off after a swim in the pond. Sometimes he was happy just to rub his hands together, and to continue on with even greater ardor.

As he stared at the road ahead, he pieced together, so to speak, his thoughts from the morning and day before. He took special delight in remembering the thoughts he had tried to expel: the doubts and difficulties, of not just whether he would find her, but if he would find her alive among the multitude of the dead and dying. "And I found her alive!" he concluded. He thought back to the most dreadful circumstances of that day. He pictured himself with the door knocker in his hand: Will she be there or won't she? And the rude welcome he found! He had barely enough time to absorb his disappointment before the deranged mob was upon him. And the lazaretto, that sea of people! "I tried to find her there! And I did!" He remembered his surveillance of the procession of convalescents: What an awful moment! How heartbreaking not to find her among them! At that point, nothing had mattered to him anymore. And the women's quarter! And there, behind that hut, when he least expected it, that voice, that unmistakable voice! And to see her, see her on her feet! But then? There was still that one last knot of the vow, tighter than ever. This, too, had been untied. And his hatred of Don Rodrigo, gnawing at him constantly, exacerbating every difficulty, poisoning every joy. That, too, had vanished. I cannot imagine a man more alive with joy, if not for his uncertainties about Agnese, his sad forebodings about Padre Cristoforo, and the persistence of the plague.

He reached Sesto toward evening. The rain showed no sign of stopping. Although he was drenched to the bone, he didn't even consider seeking lodgings, knowing how difficult it would be. His only discomfort was his appetite, since it would take much more than a meager soup from a Capuchin to nourish a joy like his. He looked around for a bakery, saw one, and got two loaves of bread, which were extended to him with tongs, accompanied by all the

other ceremonies. One in his pocket, one in his mouth, and he was on his way again.

By the time he got to Monza, night had fallen, but he still managed to find the gate that set him on the right road. Apart from that (which, to be honest, was a big advantage), you can imagine what the road looked like, and what it was turning into from one moment to the next. Sunken between two embankments (as all the roads used to be: I'm sure I mentioned this earlier), like a riverbed, on that night you could well have called the road, if not a river, then at least a millstream, with potholes waiting to suck in your feet and your shoes. Renzo navigated it as best he could without losing his patience, without swearing, and without regrets, knowing that no matter how difficult it was, every step would lead him forward, the rain would stop when it pleased God, daybreak would arrive at the usual time, and the distance he had traveled would then be behind him.

I should add that he only started thinking when he couldn't avoid it. Thoughts were distractions. His mind was more occupied with revisiting the sad years that had passed by: so many predicaments, so much adversity, so many times that he'd been about to lose all hope and give up. He contrasted those memories with his dreams of a very different future: the arrival of Lucia, the wedding, setting up house, telling stories about the past, and spending the rest of their lives together.

And what did he do whenever he found himself at a fork in the road? Whether inexperience, the darkness, or pure chance always put him on the right path, I couldn't tell you. When in his later years he'd tell the story in great detail, and at great length (everything leads me to believe that our anonymous author heard the story, more than once, from Renzo himself), he would say that as far as he could remember, the whole night might as well have been a dream. The fact remains that, at daybreak, he found himself by the banks of the Adda.

It never stopped raining but, at one point, it slowed from a del-

uge to a thin, soft, and steady drizzle. The high scattered clouds created a veil that was thick but soft and diaphanous. By the light of dawn, Renzo could see the surrounding countryside, and in the middle, his own village. At the sight of it, his words fell short. I myself can add nothing except to say that everything he saw—the mountains, the nearby Resegone, and the Lecco territory—had become something that belonged to him. He looked down at himself, and was startled to realize how different his outward appearance was, compared to how he felt inside. His clothes were wrinkled and stuck to his body. He was drenched from his head to his waist, and covered in mud from the waist down. The few clean spots looked more like they were the splatters and stains. If he had seen himself in a full-length mirror, he would have been even more shocked: the brim of his hat drooped and hung limply, while his hair hung down, sticking to his face. He may have been tired, but he didn't feel that way. The combination of the early morning breeze, the chill of the night, and the light rain only increased his sense of triumph and his desire to walk even faster.

He's in Pescate. He's walking along the lower stretch of the Adda, and casting a melancholy gaze at Pescarenico. He crosses the bridge. He traverses the roads and fields in what feels like an instant, and arrives at the home of his friend and host, who was already awake, and standing in the doorway to check on the weather. He looked up at that drenched, muddy, and—let's just say it—filthy, dirty figure, who somehow still appeared lively and carefree. In all his days, he'd never seen a man who had looked worse, and yet was still so happy.

"Oh!" he said. "Already back? And in this weather? How did it go?"

"She's there," said Renzo, "she's there."

"Healthy?"

"Recovered, which is better. I'll have to thank the Lord and the Blessed Virgin as long as I live. But great things. Amazing things. I'll tell you everything later."

"What in the world happened to you?"

"Aren't I beautiful?"

"Honestly, you could use your top half to wipe down your bottom half. But wait a minute. Let me build you a nice fire."

"I won't say no. Do you know where my search for Lucia took me? To the gates of the lazaretto. But that didn't stop me! The weather did its job, and I did mine."

His friend went out and came back with two armloads of firewood. He set one pile down on the floor, the other on the hearth, and quickly got a nice fire going using the embers from the night before. Meanwhile Renzo took off his hat, shook it a couple of times, and tossed it on the floor. Peeling off his doublet was more of a struggle. From the pocket of his breeches he removed his dagger. The sheaf was wet, as if he had left it to soak. He set it on a bench and said, "My knife is drenched, too. But it's only water! Not blood! Thank God. But I came close! I'll tell you about it later," and he rubbed his hands together. "Can you do me another favor?" he added. "Can you fetch me that bundle I left up in the bedroom? It'll take a while before the clothes on my back are dry."

Returning with the bundle, his friend said, "I imagine you must be hungry, too. I'm sure there was plenty to drink while you were on the road, but did you find anything to eat?"

"I managed to buy two loaves of bread late yesterday, but to tell you the truth, they barely hit the spot."

"Let me take care of you," said the friend. He filled a kettle with water and then hooked it to the chain, adding, "I'm going to milk the cow. When I'm back with the milk, the water will be ready and we can cook a nice polenta. In the meantime, make yourself comfortable."

Left to himself, Renzo struggled to peel off the rest of his clothing, which was glued to his skin. He dried himself off and got dressed in clean clothes from head to toe. The friend returned and went to the kettle. Renzo sat down in the meantime, and waited.

"Now I can feel how tired I am," he said, "what a slog! But this is nothing: I've got stories enough to tell all day. Milan is in terrible shape! The things you see! The things you touch! Things that make you feel disgusting. I'd almost say that this little downpour is just

what was needed to rinse away the filth. And the things those gentlemen down there wanted to do to me! I'll tell you all about it. But if you saw the lazaretto, you'd drown in misery. But enough. I'll tell you the whole story. She's there, and she'll come here, and she'll be my wife. And you have to be my witness. And plague or no plague, for a few hours at least I want us to be happy."

As promised, he spent the whole day telling the story to his friend, who, especially since it continued to drizzle, spent the day at home, sitting next to Renzo or busying himself with his wine vat and cask, and other chores in preparation for the vintage. Renzo was only too happy to lend him a hand, since he was the type who, as he used to say, gets more tired from doing nothing than from working. But he could not resist making a quick trip to Agnese's house, to peek through one window in particular, and to rub his hands together again. He returned before anyone could see him and went straight to bed. He got up before daybreak. Although the skies were still not clear, the rain had stopped, so he set out for Pasturo.

It was early when he arrived, still feeling anxious and eager to bring all these matters to a close, as you the reader might be, too. He asked around for Agnese, heard that she was fine, and was directed to the isolated cottage where she lived. Arriving there, he called out her name from the street. At the sound of his voice, she raced to the window, and stood there with her mouth agape, struggling to emit I don't know what word or sound. Renzo went first, saying, "Lucia has recovered. I saw her the day before yesterday. She sends her greetings and will come soon. And then I've got . . . I've got some things to tell you."

Between her surprise at his appearance, her happiness at the news, and her eagerness to know more, Agnese would start to exclaim, then to ask a question, but never completing either one. Then, forgetting the precautions she had long been accustomed to taking, she said, "I'm coming downstairs to open up for you."

"Wait. And the plague?" said Renzo. "You haven't had it, I believe."

"I haven't. And you?"

"I have. But you have to be careful. I've just come from Milan and, as you'll hear, I was in the plague up to my ears. Yes, I've changed my clothes, from head to toe, but it's a nasty disease. It sticks to you, sometimes, like a curse. And since God has preserved you so far, I want you to be careful until this contagion has ended. Because you are our mother, and I want us all to live together joyfully for many years to come, in recompense for the great suffering that we, or at least I, have had to bear."

"But . . ." Agnese started to say.

"Shhh!" Renzo interrupted. "No ifs, ands, or buts. I know what you want to say, but as you'll hear, 'but' is a word we don't need to use anymore. Let's go someplace in the open, where we can speak freely, without danger, and you'll hear about everything."

Agnese pointed to a garden behind the house, adding, "Go in around the back. You'll see two benches facing each other that are perfect for us. I'll be right there."

Renzo went to sit on one bench. A minute later, Agnese was on the other. And since you, my readers, know all about the events leading up to their reunion, can you imagine if you had been there yourself, to witness with your own eyes their animated conversation, to hear with your own ears their stories, questions, explanations, exclamations, condolences, and rejoicing—about Don Rodrigo, Padre Cristoforo, and all the rest—and their descriptions of the future, as bright and rosy as their dreams from the past? I'm sure that you would not only have enjoyed it, but you would have been the last to leave. Yet you wouldn't much care to read it, in my opinion, and would much rather imagine what they were saying, if I were to set the whole conversation down on paper, with mute words of ink, and not a single new event to relate. The conclusion was reached that all three of them would set up their new household in the Bergamasque village where Renzo had already established himself. As for when, nothing could be decided since it depended on the plague and other circumstances. As soon as the danger was past, Agnese would return home to wait for Lucia, un-

less Lucia got there first. In the meantime, Renzo would stop by Pasturo often to see his mother and keep her informed of any new developments.

Before he left, he offered her money, saying, "I still have all those coins. I made my own vow, not to touch them until things were cleared up. So, if you need money, bring me a bowl filled with water and vinegar, and I'll drop fifty shiny new scudi inside."

"No, no," said Agnese, "I've already got more than enough for me. Keep what you have for yourself: You'll need it to set up house."

Renzo went back to his village, buoyed by the joy of finding another person he loved safe and sound. He spent the rest of the day and night at his friend's house. The next morning, he set off on the road again, this time toward his adopted village.

He found Bortolo in good health, and less afraid of losing it, since in the past several days, things had quickly taken a turn for the better there, too. Fewer people were falling ill, and they were no longer suffering from the same terrible disease. Gone were the deadly bruises and the violent symptoms. Instead there were low, mainly intermittent fevers, with, at most, small discolored swellings that could be treated like normal boils. The village was already looking different. The survivors were starting to emerge, contacting one another and exchanging condolences and congratulations. Talk was already underway about reopening the factories. The bosses were already thinking of finding and hiring workers, especially in trades where there had already been shortages before the epidemic, such as silk-working. Renzo promised his cousin he would return to work, without pretense (provided he received the required approvals) once he was married and settled in the village. In the meantime, he made the necessary preparations: He found a bigger house, which misfortune had made easy and inexpensive, but he had to dip into his savings to equip it with furniture and household equipment. He didn't have to sacrifice too much because everything was so cheap, and there were more things to buy than people to buy them.

After I don't know how many days, he returned to his home-

town, which he found had changed even more remarkably. He hurried off to Pasturo at once. Agnese was in good spirits and ready to return home, if her home was still there. So he accompanied her to Pescarenico, but I will not tell you everything they must have felt or said at the sight of those familiar places again.

Agnese found everything as she had left it. She could not resist saying that, for once, since the house had belonged to a poor widow and a poor girl, the angels must have kept watch over it.

"That other time," she added, "you would have thought that God had his eyes somewhere else, and wasn't thinking of us, since he allowed the few possessions we had to be taken away. Well, now He's gone and done the opposite, because He found a way to send me a tidy sum of money that helped me replace everything. Well, not exactly everything. There was Lucia's trousseau, all nice new things, which they stole along with the rest: That still has to be taken care of. But lo and behold, now we're retrieving everything we lost. If someone had only told me when I was struggling to put together that first trousseau: 'Poor woman, do you think you're doing this for Lucia? You have no idea who you're doing it for! Heaven knows what sort of creature will get those linens, that fabric.' As for Lucia, who really does need a trousseau, now a good soul is going to take care of it, a woman I don't even know."

Agnese's first order of business was to make her poor little cottage as hospitable as she could manage for that good soul. Then she went looking for some silk to spin, to kill time by keeping busy.

Renzo, for his part, was not idle during those already long days. Luckily he had a second trade. He started farming again. Occasionally, he helped his friend, who was fortunate in times like these to have at his service a worker, and such a skilled worker at that. Other times, he cultivated and tilled Agnese's garden, which had gone to seed in her absence. As for his own land, he did not tend to it at all, for it was as tangled as a head of hair, and required more than two hands to revive it. He did not even set foot in it, or in his house for that matter. The sight of such devastation would have been too painful, and he had already decided to get rid of everything, at any

price, and to invest what little profit he could make from it into his new home.

If the survivors were like people returned from the dead, then you could say that Renzo's village considered him resurrected twice over. Everyone welcomed and congratulated him, and they all wanted to hear his story. You might be wondering: What about that warrant for his arrest? He didn't let it trouble him. He almost didn't give it a second thought, assuming that the men in charge of executing it weren't thinking about it, either, and he was not wrong. And it wasn't just because the plague had turned so many things upside down. As you might have noticed in other parts of this story, it was common in those days for both general and specific decrees against individuals to remain null and void if they were not acted on immediately, unless some powerful personal animosity kept them alive and enforceable.

These decrees were like bullets from a musket that have missed their target and end up on the ground, where they don't threaten anyone. But that was a consequence of the great ease with which those decrees were issued. A man's actions are limited, especially when orders outstrip his ability to carry them out. For what enters the sleeve might not fit through the cuffs.

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If anyone is wondering how Renzo got along with Don Abbondio during this time, I'll just say that they kept their distance from each other. The priest was afraid to hear any hint of marriage, since the mere mention of the word conjured up images of Don Rodrigo with his bravi, on the one hand, and the Cardinal with his arguments, on the other. Renzo did not want to tempt fate by stirring up difficulties and useless talk. He was determined not to bring up the matter before its time had come. If he needed to talk, he could go to Agnese. "Do you think she'll come soon?" one would ask. "I hope so," the other would answer. And a little later, the person who answered would ask the same question. They managed to pass the time with these and similar methods, but the more time passed, the slower it seemed to go by.

I'll condense all that time into a single moment for the reader with a short summary. A few days after Renzo's visit, Lucia left the lazaretto with the good widow. Upon leaving, they had to quarantine, so they confined themselves to the widow's home. They spent part of the time putting together Lucia's trousseau, to which Lucia herself contributed, despite the widow's protests. Once their quarantine had been lifted, the widow left her shop and house in the care of her brother, the commissioner, and they made their preparations for the trip. I could simply say: They left, they arrived, and all that followed, but despite my desire to hurry things along for the reader's sake, three things happened during that interval that we cannot ignore. And for two of them, at least, I think the reader would agree that I would be wrong to do so.

First, after the commotion of their first confidences, Lucia was able to tell the widow about her adventures in greater detail, and in a more orderly fashion. She spoke more openly about the Signora who had sheltered her at the Monza convent. The widow told her a few things that unlocked many mysteries and filled her with a sad and fearful astonishment. She learned that the hapless nun had been ordered by the Cardinal to a convent in Milan under suspicion of atrocious acts. After much raging and struggling, she had repented and confessed. Her current life was a voluntary punishment so severe that no one could imagine anything worse, short of death. If someone wishes to know more details about this sad story, I refer you to the book I mentioned earlier.*

Second, Lucia, with more sorrow than surprise, learned from the other Capuchins in the lazaretto that Fra Cristoforo had died from the plague.

Finally, in an effort to complete what she called her "duties" before leaving, Lucia wanted to know what had happened to her for-

* The historical character on whom the Nun of Monza is based, Sister Virginia Maria de Leyva y Marino, was given a life sentence on October 17, 1608, to be walled into a small cell in Milan, from which she was released on September 25, 1622, after receiving a pardon from Cardinal Borromeo. The book to which Manzoni refers is Ripamonti, *Historiae patriae,* decadis V, book 6, chapter 3.

mer protectors, and if either of them was still alive. The widow accompanied her to the house, where they learned that both were now among the multitudes of the departed. For Donna Prassede, there was nothing left to say about her except that she was dead. But since Don Ferrante was a learned man, our anonymous author felt he should say a little more about him. At my own risk, I will transcribe more or less what he wrote.

He tells us that Don Ferrante was one of the most resolute deniers of the plague from the first mention, an opinion he upheld consistently until the bitter end, not by raising a ruckus, like the common folk, but through arguments that no one could criticize, at least, as incoherent.

"*In rerum natura*," he would say, "only two categories of things exist: *substances* and *accidents*. If I can prove that the contagion is neither one nor the other, then I will have demonstrated that it does not exist, and that it is, in fact, a chimera. So hear me out. Substances must be either spiritual or material. No one would claim that the contagion is a spiritual substance, so it is pointless to suggest that it is. Material substances must be either simple or compound. Well, the contagion is not a simple substance—air, water, fire or earth—as can be demonstrated in a few words. It is not air, otherwise it would immediately float up to its own sphere, rather than pass from one body to another. It is not water, otherwise it would be damp and dry out in the winds. It is not fire, otherwise it would burn. It is not earth, otherwise it would be visible. Nor is it a compound substance, because then it would have to be something tangible, that you could see or touch. Has anyone seen this contagion? Has anyone touched it?

"Let us now consider whether it might be an accident. Here the possibilities are even worse. These fine doctors tell us that the plague is communicated from one body to another. This is their main argument, their pretext, for issuing so many senseless orders. Now, if it was an accident, that would mean the plague was transmitted accidentally. But these two words are contradictory, since in all philosophy, there is nothing more clear, more liquid than this: an

accident cannot pass from one body to another. So to avoid crashing into Scylla, one monster, officials are forced to say that this is a manufactured accident, which only steers them toward Charybdis, another monster. Because if the contagion is manufactured, then it is not communicable and it does not propagate, contrary to all their babble. In light of this, what is the point of talking about cutaneous bruises, cutaneous eruptions, and clusters of pimples . . . ?"

Once a man burst out with, "What a bunch of rubbish!"

"No, no," Don Ferrante continued, "that's not what I'm saying. Science is science. You just have to know how to apply it. Cutaneous bruises, cutaneous eruptions, pimple clusters, swollen glands, purple buboes, black boils: they're all respected words, each with its own good and proper meaning. What I am saying is that they have nothing to do with the question at hand. Who would deny that such things may or rather do exist? What we need to know is where they come from."

This is where Don Ferrante began to run into trouble. When he was simply attacking the idea of a contagion, everyone was all ears. Never underestimate the authority of a learned man trying to prove to the public things of which they are already persuaded. But then he started identifying and trying to demonstrate that the physicians' error lay not in their assertion that a dreadful general disease existed, but rather in the cause they assigned to it. This was in the early days, when no one wanted to even hear the word *plague,* so his assertions faced rebellious, intractable tongues, rather than sympathetic ears. No one wanted to hear his long sermons, so he could only expound on his doctrine in bits and pieces.

"Even those who believe this contagion is airborne must admit its true cause," he would say, "and that is the fatal conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter. And who ever heard of influences propagating . . . ? Would physicians deny that such influences exist? Deny the existence of the stars? Or would they say that the stars are up there doing nothing, like needles in a pincushion? But what I cannot figure out about the physicians is this: They admit that we are all living under an evil conjunction, and then come to tell us, and with

what gall: 'Don't touch this,' 'Don't touch that,' and we'll be safe! As if avoiding contact between earthly bodies could prevent the virtual effect of celestial bodies! And all that fuss about the burning of rags! Poor people! Would you burn Jupiter? Would you burn Saturn?"

His fretus—meaning, on the basis of these arguments—he took no precautions against the plague. He caught it and went to bed to die, like an operatic hero, blaming it on the stars.

And his famous library? You might be able to find it at the secondhand bookstalls that line the canal.

Chapter 38

One evening Agnese heard a carriage stop outside the door. "It must be her!" And yes, it was, together with the good widow. Can you imagine their joyful embraces?

Early the next morning, Renzo stopped by, unaware of her arrival. He was making his usual visit to complain to Agnese about Lucia's long delay. The things he did and the things he said when he found her right before his eyes I will also leave to your imagination. Lucia's expressions, however, require no such effort. "Good morning. How are you?" she said, eyes lowered, without losing her composure. And don't go thinking that Renzo found her manner too distant, or that he took it badly. He took it in the spirit with which it was offered. Just as polite people know the value of understatement, he could see clearly that those words did not express everything that was in Lucia's heart. Besides, it was easy to see that she had two ways of saying them: one for Renzo, and another for all the people she might know.

"I'm fine every time I see you," the young man replied with an old expression that he could have invented in that moment.

"Poor Padre Cristoforo!" said Lucia. "We must pray for his soul, although we can be almost sure that he is praying for us in heaven."

"I was expecting it, unfortunately," Renzo replied. And this was not the only sad note that was sounded in that conversation. Renzo was like a skittish horse that digs in its heels and rears first one hoof and then the other, always planting them back in the same place, and goes through a thousand motions before taking a step and then suddenly takes off at a gallop, as if driven by the wind: This is what

time had become for Renzo. First the minutes seemed like hours, and then the hours seemed like minutes.

Not only did the widow not spoil the company: She fit in quite nicely. And certainly Renzo, when he saw her lying on that cot, could never have imagined that she would have such a sociable and jovial disposition. But the lazaretto and the countryside, death and marriage, are not one and the same. With Agnese she had already formed a friendship. With Lucia there was the pleasure of seeing her, both tender and playful, and how she gently teased her, never too much, just enough to make the girl show all the joy she had in her heart.

Finally, Renzo decided he would go to see Don Abbondio to make arrangements for the wedding. When he arrived, he joked, but in a deferential manner. "Father," he said, "have you recovered from the headache that kept you from marrying us back then? The time is right. The bride is here. And I've come by to find out when you would be available. But this time around, I'm asking you to make it quick." Don Abbondio did not say no, but he started to hem and haw, making excuses and imagining other scenarios. Should he really call out Renzo's name in a public square, with that warrant out for his arrest? Why not do the wedding someplace else? And so on and so forth.

"I see," said Renzo. "It seems you still have that headache. But hear me out." And he started to describe the state in which he had seen poor Don Rodrigo, who had surely departed the world by then. "Let's hope," he concluded, "that God has been merciful to him."

"He's got nothing to do with it," said Don Abbondio, "did you hear me say no? I'm not saying no. I'm saying . . . I've got my reasons, good reasons. But if there's a chance he's still breathing . . . Look at me: a shell of a man. I had one foot in the grave. But I'm still here. And if trouble steers clear of me . . . Well, I hope to be around for a little while longer. But with a temper like his . . . Well, anyway, as I was saying, he's got nothing to do with it."

After a little more back and forth, equally inconclusive, Renzo performed a deep bow, returned to his group, delivered his report, and concluded, "I came back here since it was all I could do to keep from blowing my top and saying something I might regret. There were moments when he acted just like the last time: the same scowl, the same arguments. If we'd gone on any longer, I'm sure he would have trotted out a few words in Latin, too. I can tell he's still dragging his feet. Maybe we should just do what he suggests, and get married where we're going to live."

"Do you know what we're going to do?" piped up the widow. "I think just us women should give it a try, to see if we can do any better. That way I, too, will have the pleasure of meeting this man, if he is indeed as you say. We should wait until after lunch, so we don't go back on the attack so soon. Now, Mr. Bridegroom, take the two of us for a walk, while Agnese is busy with lunch. I'll play the part of Lucia's mother. I want to get a good look at these mountains and the lake, which I've heard so much about. From the little I've seen, they seem quite magnificent."

Renzo took them to his friend's house, where another joyful welcome awaited. They made him promise he would come and have supper with him, not just that day, but every day, if he was able.

After the walk and lunch, Renzo left without saying where he was going. The three women lingered for a bit, trying to decide how they would handle Don Abbondio, and finally they came up with a plan of attack.

"Here they are," the priest said to himself, but he put on a happy face. He relayed his congratulations to Lucia, his regards to Agnese, and his compliments to the foreigner. He invited them to have a seat and then immediately launched into a disquisition on the plague. He wanted to hear from Lucia how she had managed to survive the troubles. When she mentioned the lazaretto, her companion also took the opportunity to speak. Then Don Abbondio spoke about his own tribulations, as was only fair. He then congratulated Agnese for making it through unscathed. The conversa-

tion went on like this for a while. The women waited for an opening to get to the heart of the matter. Finally, one of the two—I don't know which—broke the ice and brought up the marriage once again. Well, what were you expecting? Don Abbondio was deaf in that ear. It's not that he said no. But he continued to hem and haw, jumping from one topic to another.

"What we need to do," he said, "is get that warrant for his arrest lifted. You, Signora, you're from Milan: You must know how to pull strings. I'm sure you have some connections, maybe a nobleman with a little clout? Friends like that can heal every wound. And then there's a shortcut you can take, which doesn't require as much trouble. Since these two young people, and our Agnese here, already intend to move to another state (home is where the heart is, after all), they could just get married there, where the warrant isn't valid.* I can't wait to see these two joined in marriage, and I want them to be joined properly, peacefully. I'm being honest. But here, with that warrant looming over us, I could not proclaim the name of Lorenzo Tramaglino from the altar, I just couldn't do it and preserve my peace of mind. I care too much about him. I'd be afraid to do him a disservice. I'm sure you can understand. I'm sure all three of you can."

At this, Agnese and the widow began to dispute his arguments. Don Abbondio trotted them out again, in another form, but they always ended up right where they had started until Renzo arrived, with a spring in his step and good news on his face. "The Marquis *** has arrived," he said.

"What do you mean? Arrived where?" asked Don Abbondio, standing up.

"He's arrived at the palace that once belonged to Don Rodrigo. The Marquis is the legal heir, by *fideicommissum,* by entail, as they say. So there should be no more doubts. For me, I'd be happy just to

* The Italian for "Home is where the heart is" (*La patria è dove si sta bene*) is a literal translation of the Latin *Patria est ubicumque est bene,* from Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations,* V, 108.

know that the poor man died a good death. Well, I've been saying a few Our Fathers for him anyway. Now I'll say the 'De profundis.' And this Marquis is a good man."

"I'm sure he is," said Don Abbondio, "I've heard more than one person vouch for him, saying he's a man of the old school. But is it really true?"

"Would you believe the sacristan?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Because he's seen him with his own eyes. I was in the area, only because I was thinking, 'They must know something there.' And more than one person told me the same thing. Then I ran into Ambrogio, who was coming from that very place, and, as I was saying, he saw the Marquis taking possession of the palace. Would you like to hear from Ambrogio? I made him wait outside so you could hear from him yourself."

"Show him in," said Don Abbondio. Renzo went to summon the sacristan, who confirmed everything that Renzo had said, added some more details, and eliminated the remaining doubts. Then he left.

"So he's dead! Gone for good!" exclaimed Don Abbondio. "You see, my children, Providence still finds its way to certain people in the end. What wonderful news! What a relief for this poor village of ours! We couldn't breathe with that man around. It was quite a scourge, this plague. But it was also a giant broom: It swept away people we'd have never been able to get rid of otherwise, my children, for they were young, fresh, and strong. Let's face it: The priests who would have presided over their funerals one day were still seminarians. And now, in the blink of an eye they're gone, hundreds in one swoop. We won't be seeing the likes of him wandering about anymore, thugs in tow, with his arrogance, his airs, his self-importance, ramrod straight, staring people up and down as if they were only alive by his dispensation. Lo and behold, he is gone and we're still here. He'll no longer be sending his messengers around to harass honest men. He was nothing but trouble for everybody, and now we can finally say it out loud."

"I forgave him with all my heart," said Renzo.

"As well you should have," replied Don Abbondio, "but you can also thank the heavens for delivering us from him. Now, getting back to us, let me repeat myself. You can all do what you think best. If you want me to perform the marriage, I'm here. If you think another way would be easier, do as you like. As for the warrant, I no longer think it's a cause for concern. Especially since, in the meantime, a general amnesty has been issued to celebrate the birth of the Most Serene Infante.* And then there's the plague! The plague! It wiped out so many things! So, if you like . . . today is Thursday? On Sunday, I'll announce your marriage banns in church, since the old ones don't count anymore, after so much time. And then I'll be happy to perform the ceremony myself."

"You know perfectly well that's why we came," said Renzo.

"Fine. I am at your service. And I wish to inform His Eminence right away."

"Who is His Eminence?" asked Agnese.

"His Eminence," replied Don Abbondio, "is our Cardinal-Archbishop, may God preserve him."

"Oh! Begging your pardon," interjected Agnese, "but, though I may be a poor ignorant woman, I can assure you that's not his title. When we spoke to him the second time, the same way I'm speaking to you now, one of the priests took me aside and taught me the right way to address the Cardinal. You're supposed to say your most illustrious Lordship, and Monsignor."

"Well, if he were here today, he'd teach you to call him Your Eminence, have I made myself clear? Because as of June, the Pope—may God preserve him, too—has ordered that cardinals should be given this title. And do you know why he came to this decision? Because 'most illustrious Lordship' was once reserved

* Balthasar Charles, Prince of Asturias (1629–46) was the only son of King Philip IV of Spain and his first wife, Elisabeth of France, and thus heir apparent to the Spanish throne until his early death at the age of sixteen.

only for these godly men, and certain princes . . . well, even you can see what that title's turned into nowadays, and how many people claim it. And how happily they lap it up! So what was the Pope supposed to do? Take it away from everyone? Then there'd be complaints, appeals, unpleasantness, trouble. And nothing would change. So he found an excellent solution. Little by little, we'll start to call bishops 'Your Eminence.' Then the abbots will want it. Then the provosts. Because that's the way men are, always wanting to climb higher and higher. Then the canons . . ."

"And then the parish priests," added the widow.

"No, no," Don Abbondio continued, "the parish priests still have to pull the weight. No need to worry that they'll take on these bad habits. It'll be 'Reverend' from now until doomsday. But I wouldn't be surprised if the nobility, who are used to being called 'Most Illustrious,' just like cardinals, will want to be called 'Your Eminence' themselves. And if that's what they want, that's what they'll get. And then, whoever the pope is by then will have to figure out a new title for cardinals.

"Now let's get back to our business. So, on Sunday I'll read your banns in church. In the meantime, do you know what I thought would help? We'll apply for a dispensation for two more couples. If things are happening in the curia the way they're happening here, they're pretty busy giving dispensations. On Sunday I already have . . . one . . . two . . . three marriage banns, not counting yours. And there might be more to come. And then you'll see how much busier it's going to get. No one wants to be single anymore. Perpetua couldn't have picked a worse time to die. Even she would have found a suitor nowadays. And I imagine things are the same in Milan, Signora."

"They certainly are. Can you believe that fifty marriage banns were read last Sunday in my parish alone!"

"Let me just say it: The world isn't ready to end just yet. And you don't have any bees buzzing around you, Signora?"

"No, no. I haven't given it a single thought, nor would I want to."

"Yes, I see, you prefer to be alone. Even Agnese, look. Even Agnese . . ."

"Huh? You must be kidding."

"Of course I'm kidding, and it's about time we could! We've been through some awful moments, haven't we, my children? Really awful. Let's hope these four days we still have left to live in this world will be a little better. But lucky you! If no catastrophes happen, you have your whole lives ahead of you to talk about the troubles of the past. But my clock is close to midnight and, well, scoundrels can die, plague victims can recover, but there's no cure for old age. As the saying goes, *senectus ipsa est morbus*—old age itself is a disease."*

"Go ahead," said Renzo, "speak Latin if you feel like it. I don't mind."

"So you've still got a grudge against Latin? Then I'll teach you a lesson. When you come up to the altar with this girl, to hear a little Latin, I'll say, 'You don't want Latin: Then go in peace.' Is that what you'd like?"

"Eh! I know what I'm saying," Renzo continued. "Church Latin doesn't scare me. It's an honest Latin, holy, the language of the Mass. You priests on the altar have to read what's written in the book. I'm talking about sneaky Latin, outside the church, that ambushes you in the middle of a conversation. For example, here we are, and all our troubles are over. And you trotted out some Latin back there, in that corner, to make me think you couldn't marry us, and that more steps were needed, and I don't know what else. Can you put it into Italian for me now?"

"Shut up, you fool! Don't go stirring things up again. Because if we draw up the balance sheet, I don't know which of us is more sinned against. Everything is forgiven. Now not another word about it. You got in your jabs, too, Renzo. Nothing surprises me coming from you. You're a little rascal. But her? Quiet as a mouse, the little

* Terence, *Phormio*, act 4, 575.

saint, the Madonna herself, so holy you'd think it was a sin to be wary of her. Well, of course I know who she learned that from, I certainly do!" In saying this, he pointed his accusing finger from Lucia to Agnese.

The high spirits, the relish, with which he uttered those reprimands is almost indescribable. The news had given him a lightheartedness, a wit, that had been idle for quite some time. And we would have a long way to go until the end of this story if I were to report the remainder of that conversation, which he dragged out, believing more than once that his listeners were about to leave, and detaining them a bit longer on the doorstep, always with a little more small talk.

The next day, he received a visit as welcome as it was unexpected: the Marquis himself. He was a man midway between his prime and old age, and one whose appearance seemed to vouch for the fame that had preceded him: open, courteous, calm, humble, dignified, with an air of resigned sorrow about him.

"I am here," he said, "to convey the greetings of the Cardinal-Archbishop."

"Oh, you are too kind."

"When I was about to take my leave of that peerless man, who honors me with his friendship, he spoke to me of two young people from this parish who were betrothed, and had run into some trouble on account of that poor Don Rodrigo. The Monsignor would like to have some news of them. Are they alive? Has their business been taken care of?"

"Everything has been taken care of. In fact, I was just about to write to His Eminence, but now that I have the honor . . ."

"Are they here?"

"Yes, and as soon as possible, they will become man and wife."

"Please tell me if there's anything I can do to help them, and the most appropriate way. I have lost the only two children I had, as well as their mother, in this calamity, and I have come into three considerable inheritances, which I do not need, since the one I have

is already more than enough. So if you know of an opportunity for me to use some of it, you would truly be doing me a favor, especially an opportunity like this."

"Heaven bless you! Why couldn't everyone be like you? Well, I, too, wish to thank you from the bottom of my heart on behalf of these two children of mine. And since your most illustrious Lordship has encouraged me to do so, yes, in fact, I will suggest a solution that might be to your liking.

"You should know that these good people have decided to set up house elsewhere, and to sell the few possessions they have here under the sun: The young man's vineyard, which is only an acre and a half, to be honest, and badly neglected. It's worth little more than the land that it's on, nothing more. He also has a cottage, and the bride has another: two rat holes, really. A gentleman like yourself doesn't know what it's like for the poor when they want to sell off their possessions. They always end up being taken advantage of by some crook, who has maybe been eyeing their tiny plot of land for a while. Once he finds out that they're ready to sell, the crook pretends he's no longer interested, so the poor chase after him and sell him everything for a crust of bread. Especially in circumstances like these.

"I'm sure the Marquis can see what I'm getting at. The most generous charity your Lordship could offer these two is to help them out of this bind by buying their few paltry possessions. I may be a bit biased, to be honest, since my parish would stand to gain from a patron like yourself. But it is up to you to decide what's best. I have spoken out of deference to your wishes."

The Marquis praised the suggestion, thanked Don Abbondio, and asked him to be the judge of the price, and to set it high. He then made the priest's jaw drop by proposing that they go straight to the house of the bride, where they would presumably also find the groom.

Don Abbondio was bubbling over with joy on the way to the house, as you can imagine, and soon he came up with another idea, and couldn't resist saying it out loud. "Since your most illustrious

Lordship is inclined to help these two out, there is another favor you could do for them. The young man has a warrant out for his arrest, a kind of ban, for a prank he pulled in Milan two years ago. He got mixed up in the big riot that day, meaning no harm, out of sheer ignorance, like a mouse caught in a trap. Nothing serious. Kid stuff, an escapade. He wouldn't hurt a fly! If anyone knows him, it's me. I baptized him, I saw him grow up. If your Lordship might enjoy hearing the poor ramble on, you can ask him to tell you the story, and you'll hear it for yourself. Since it's an old story by now, no one is going to bother him. As I said, he's thinking of moving to another state but, as time goes by, he might want to come back here for whatever reason, you never know. I hardly need to tell you that it's always best not to have a criminal record. Your Lordship is a man of some influence in Milan, as is only right, and being such an important nobleman, and such a great man—no, no, don't deny it—a recommendation, a good word from you, is more than it would take for the charges to be dropped."

"Are the charges against him very serious?"

"No, I don't believe so. At first they wanted to throw the book at him, but nowadays I believe it's a mere formality."

"Since that's the case, it should be easy. I would be happy to take care of the matter."

"And you don't want people to call you a great man? Well I, for one, am going to say you are, whether you like it or not. And even if I did keep my mouth shut, it wouldn't matter because everyone is saying the same thing. And *vox populi, vox Dei*—the voice of the people is the voice of God."

The three women and Renzo were all at the house. I'll leave the reader to imagine their reactions. Even the bare rough walls, the dirty windows, the squat stools, and the chipped dishes, I daresay, were amazed to receive such an extraordinary visit. The Marquis started the conversation, speaking of the Cardinal and other matters, with open cordiality as well as tactful regard. He then proceeded to make the offer that was the reason for his visit.

When he asked Don Abbondio to set the price, the priest stepped

forward. After a few protests and excuses, insisting that it wasn't his place, that he'd be stumbling in the dark, and that he was just being obedient, and that it was up to them, he came up with a number that was, in his opinion, an exaggerated estimate. But the Marquis replied that, for his part, he was overjoyed. He pretended that he'd misunderstood, and actually doubled his offer. He refused any objection, and cut short all talk by inviting everyone to lunch on the day of the wedding at his palace, where he would present the notarized deed.

Once he was back home, Don Abbondio remarked to himself, "Now if the plague had the same effect always and everywhere, it would be a shame to speak badly of it. You might almost say we need one every generation or so, and we could draw up an agreement to do just that. But with the possibility of recovery, of course."

The dispensation arrived, and so did the pardon, and, finally, the happy day. The bride and groom made their triumphant and safe way to the church where, by the blessing of none other than Don Abbondio, they became man and wife. Another even more singular triumph was their visit to the palace. You can imagine how they must have felt as they walked up that hill and entered through the front door, and the things they must have said, each in their own way. I will only report that more than one person voiced the thought, and more than once, that the only thing missing from their happy party was poor Fra Cristoforo. "But one thing we do know for certain," they later added, "is that he is in a better place than us."

The Marquis welcomed them in grand style, leading them to the servants' dining room, where he seated the newlyweds at the table, along with Agnese and the merchant's widow. Before he retired upstairs to dine with Don Abbondio, he decided to stay for a while to keep the guests company, and indeed to help serve them. I know some of you must be thinking how it would have been simpler for everyone to dine at the same table. But as I've explained to you, he was a good man, not an "eccentric," as he would be called nowadays. And as I've told you, he was a humble man, but not a paragon

of humility: willing to defer to these good people, but not to spend time with them as an equal.

After the two separate meals, the deed was drawn up by an accountant, but not by Professor Argle-Bargle. The latter, by which I mean his mortal remains, was and still is in Canterelli. For those who are not from around there, I realize that an explanation might be in order.

About a half-mile above Lecco, and almost right on the border of the neighboring town Castello, there is a place, at the crossroads, called Canterelli. On one side you can see raised ground, a sort of man-made hill, with a cross on top, which is no more than a burial mound for those who died in that plague. Traditionally, they are just called victims of the plague, but those remains belong undoubtedly to the victims of that plague, which was the last and most deadly in memory. And you know that traditions, without a little push, always say too little on their own.

On the way back, the only complication was the weight of all the money Renzo had to carry. As you know, however, he had already lived other lives. I'm not referring to the labor of his mind, no small thing, as it pondered how best to spend the money. To envision the projects passing through his head, the reflections, the fantasies; to hear the pros and cons, whether to invest in agriculture or industry; was like witnessing a dispute between two learned academics in the previous century. For him the dilemma was much more real. Since he was only one person, you couldn't tell him: Why do you need to choose? Why not do both? For the means are basically the same, and two, like legs, are better than one.

His every thought was dedicated to packing up and moving: the Tramaglino household to its new home, and the widow back to Milan. Many were the tears, the thank-yous, the promises to visit one another. Equally tender, though without the tears, was Renzo's separation from the family of his host and friend. And don't go thinking that the goodbyes with Don Abbondio were cold. Those good children had always maintained a respectful attachment to

their priest who, in his heart of hearts, had always been fond of them. It's those blessed affairs that get in the way of affections.

To all who wonder whether they also felt some sadness to be separated from their birthplace, from those mountains, of course they did: Since there is more than enough sadness, I was about to say, to go around. It cannot have been too deep, however, since they could have spared themselves by staying put, now that the two great impediments, Don Rodrigo and the arrest warrant, had been removed. But for some time now, all three had gotten used to seeing the town where they were moving as their new home. Renzo had brought the women around to the idea by describing the advantages for workers and the many other opportunities for a good life there. Not to mention that they had all been through such bitter moments in the place they were leaving behind. And sad memories eventually spoil thoughts of the places that recall them. And if they happen to be our birthplaces, those memories are liable to be even harsher and more poignant. Even the child, according to the manuscript, sleeps happily on its nurse's breast, and reaches with greed and trust for the pap that is gently nourishing it. But when the wet nurse begins to wean the child, by spreading wormwood on her breast, the child will try to suckle, again and again, but eventually learn to break away. Crying, yes, but still breaking away.

So can you believe that as soon as they arrived and settled into their new village, Renzo encountered some unpleasantness, ready and waiting? Nothing much, really, but it takes so little to unsettle a state of happiness! Here, in brief, is what happened.

Gossip had started to circulate about Lucia well before her arrival in the village. Knowing how much Renzo had suffered on her account, and how steadfast and true he had always been, a word or two may have been spoken by friends partial to him and to everything about him that had sparked a certain curiosity to see the young girl, and certain expectations of her beauty. Now you know what expectations are like: fanciful, gullible, and confident. Put to the test, they become harsh, fickle: Nothing is good enough, since

they don't really know what they expected, and they ruthlessly withdraw the indulgence that had been accorded without reason.

When this Lucia appeared, there were many who thought her hair should be spun from gold, her cheeks as red as roses, each eye more beautiful than the other, and I have no idea what else. They shrugged their shoulders and turned up their noses, saying, "All this fuss over her?" After so much time and so much talk, they were expecting something better. And who was she, after all? A peasant girl like many others. If that's what you want, there are far prettier ones, ripe for the picking. Under closer scrutiny, everyone found something different that was wrong with her, and some even thought she was downright ugly.

But since no one said these things to Renzo's face, no great harm had been done. The harm that was done, instead, was by those who reported such comments to him: And Renzo, well, what do you expect? He was cut to the quick. He started to obsess over them, and complain loudly to anyone who cared to speak with him, but mostly to himself. "Is it any business of yours? Who told you what to expect, anyway? Mē? When did I ever say she was pretty? And when you told me she wasn't, did I say anything other than that she was a good girl? She's a peasant! When did I ever say I was bringing a princess here? You don't like her? So don't look at her. You have beautiful women of your own: Go look at them!"

Here you can see how a little foolishness can sometimes suffice to decide a man's condition for life. If Renzo had followed through on his initial plans to spend the rest of his life in that village, he wouldn't have been very happy. The steady stream of nastiness had made him nasty in turn. He was rude to everyone, since anyone might have been one of Lucia's critics. Not that he had forgotten his manners, but you wouldn't believe how many niceties you can discard without violating the rules of proper behavior, until it ends with a knife in the belly. There was something slightly sardonic in his every word. He found something to criticize in everything. If there was bad weather for two days in a row, he would immediately

remark, "What else can you expect in a place like this!" I tell you, there were more than a few people who started to find him annoying, including some who used to like him. And over time, with one thing leading to another, he found himself at war, so to speak, with almost the entire village, without ever fully understanding the reason for his unhappiness.

You could say that the plague had made a commitment to right all of Renzo's wrongs. For one thing, it had taken away the owner of another silk mill, located at the gates of Bergamo. The heir, a shiftless youth, having found nothing to amuse him in the whole factory, was intent on and indeed raring to sell, even at half price. But he wanted immediate payment, so that he could use the money immediately for less productive pursuits. Bortolo heard about the matter and ran to see it. He haggled and got a better price than he could have ever imagined. But the demand for a cash sale spoiled the deal. The amount Bortolo had set aside, little by little, by saving, was still far short of the agreed price. He asked the man for a little more time, went back home to tell his cousin, and proposed that they buy the factory together, fifty-fifty. This splendid proposal resolved all the financial doubts of Renzo, who immediately opted for industry and said yes. They went together and sealed the contract.

When the new owners took possession, Lucia, with no expectations to face this time around, finally escaped the brunt of criticism, and you could even say that people didn't mind her. Renzo came to learn that more than one person had remarked, "Did you see the pretty blockhead who just arrived?" And the adjective allowed him to ignore the noun.

The unhappiness he had felt in the other village taught him a useful lesson. Until then, he had been too quick to judge, and only too happy to criticize, the wives of other men, and many more things. After he realized that words have one effect on the tongue and another on the ear, he made it a habit to listen to his own words inside before uttering them.

Don't go thinking, however, that there were not some annoyances there, as well. Mankind (according to our anonymous author, who you know had a strange taste in similes, but let's quote this one, too, and may it be the last)—mankind, for as long as he is in this world, is like an invalid lying on a somewhat uncomfortable bed. All around him he sees other beds—well made, neat, and flat—and imagines that he could sleep quite comfortably in any of them. But if he does manage to change beds, as soon he settles into the new one, he'll feel a twig pricking him here, a lump pressing him there, and find himself, in short, right back where he started. This is why—the anonymous author suggests—we should think less about feeling good and more about doing good, and thus end up feeling better.

Being a true man of the seventeenth century, his explanation is a bit laborious, but he is basically right. For that matter, he continues, our good people no longer faced troubles and tribulations of the type and severity I have recounted here. From then on, their life was the most peaceful, the most happy, and the most enviable. So much so that if I were to describe it, you would be bored to death.

Business went like a charm. At the beginning there were some setbacks due to the shortage of workers and the bad habits and demands of the few who remained. Decrees were published restricting workers' pay. Despite this charitable contribution, business eventually picked up, because in the end it must. Then another more reasonable decree arrived from Venice: a ten-year exemption from all personal and property taxes for foreigners who came to live in that state. For our young couple this was another windfall.

Before the end of their first year of marriage, a beautiful child came into this world. As if born to fulfill Renzo's magnanimous vow, it was a girl. And you can be sure they called her Maria. Through the years I don't know how many more children they had, of both sexes. Agnese's hands were full carrying them back and forth, one after the other, scolding them and planting such big kisses on their faces that they left white marks. And they were all well behaved,

and Renzo wanted them to learn to read and write, saying that, since this vexatious business existed, then they should at least have the benefit of it.

The best part was hearing him tell his adventures. He always concluded by listing the important things he'd learned, to better govern himself in the future. "What I've learned," he would say, "is not to throw myself into the fray. Not to give speeches from a soapbox. To watch who I speak with. I've learned not to lift my elbow too much and not to linger at the door, knocker in hand, when I'm surrounded by an angry mob. I've learned not to tie a bell to my foot before thinking what might come of it," and a hundred other things.

Lucia did not so much dispute his lessons as find something missing from his rambling. After hearing him repeat the same litany over and over, and bristling inside every time, one day she told her moralizing friend, "What about me? What do you think I've learned? I didn't go looking for trouble: Trouble came looking for me. Unless what you mean to say," she added, smiling sweetly, "is that it was my mistake to love and to promise myself to you."

At first Renzo was dumbstruck. But after long conversations and soul-searching, they reached the conclusion that trouble often comes calling when it's been invited in. Not even the most cautious and innocent behavior can keep it away. And when trouble does come calling, rightly or wrongly, faith in God softens the blow and turns it to a better purpose. While these may be the conclusions of poor people, they sound so right to me that I thought I would write them down here, as the moral of the story.

Which, if this story hasn't displeased you, should make you think kindly of the man who wrote it and, also, a little, of the man who revised it. But if we have only succeeded in boring you instead, believe me, we didn't do so on purpose.

THE COLUMN OF INFAMY

CHAPTER ONE

At about half past four in the morning of 21 June 1630 it unfortunately happened that a woman was looking from the window of a sort of bridge which at that time crossed the Via della Vetra de' Cittadini at the end where it meets the Corso di Porta Ticinese, almost opposite the columns of San Lorenzo. The woman's name was Caterina Rosa. As she stood there she noticed a man in a black cloak with his hat pulled down over his eyes and in his hand a piece of paper on which, so she was to say in her deposition, 'he seemed to be writing'. She watched the man enter the street 'and draw near the wall immediately after turning the corner', and then 'from time to time draw his hands along the wall'. It was then, she said, 'that it occurred to me he might perhaps be one of the people who had recently been going about smearing on the walls'. Her suspicions aroused, she went into another room, to a window that looked down the length of the street, in order to keep the stranger in view; 'and I saw', she said, 'that he kept on touching the wall with his hands'.

There was another watcher, at the window of a house in the same street, a woman called Ottavia Bono. Whether she formed the same crazy suspicion on her own account, or only after Caterina Rosa had started the rumour, we cannot say; in any case, on being interrogated, she too declared that she had seen the man from the moment of his entering the street, though she did not mention his touching the wall as he went along it. 'I saw him stop,' she said, 'at the end of the garden wall of the Crivelli's house, and I saw a paper in his hand on which he seemed to be writing with his right hand, and then I saw him raise this hand from the paper and rub it on the garden wall where there is a white patch.' The man was probably rubbing ink off his fingers, for he seems in fact to have been writing: at his interrogation the next day, when asked whether 'his actions that morning had

anything to do with writing', he answered, 'Yes, my lord.' And as for his keeping close to the wall, a good enough reason for this was that it was raining, as Caterina herself mentioned, though she drew her own conclusion from the fact, saying: 'And mind you, this is important; it was raining yesterday when he was doing the smearing, and he must have chosen the time on purpose as then more people would get the stuff on their clothes, because they would go close to the wall for shelter.'

After stopping (as Ottavia said) the man turned back down the road again; he reached the corner and was about to pass out of sight when, again unfortunately, he was met by another man who entered the street and greeted him. Caterina Rosa, who by this time, to keep the 'smearer' in sight, had returned to her first window, asked the second man who it was he had greeted. The second man, as he was to declare later at the trial, replied that the other was someone he knew only by sight but that he knew he was a Commissioner of the Sanità. 'And I then said to him,' reports Caterina in her deposition, 'that I had seen the other man doing things I didn't like the look of at all. And then the news got around' (chiefly through her, of course), 'and people came out and saw the walls smeared with a sort of thick yellowish paste; and especially the people who live at Tradate said they had found the walls of the approach to their gate all smeared.' The other woman said the same. Asked if she knew why the man rubbed his hand on the wall, she answered, 'the walls were found smeared afterwards, especially round the Tradate gate.'

There are things here that would be reckoned implausible in a novel, though alas the blinding of reason by passion accounts for them only too well. It never occurred to either of these witnesses that in thus describing (especially the first witness) step by step the man's walk up the road and back, neither was able to say that he had entered that particular street; nor did it seem to them 'important' that he appeared to have taken no precautions not to be observed—despite the fact that he had waited until the sun was risen before starting his peculiar business; that he never even glanced up at the windows; that

having passed up the street he calmly turned round and came down it again, as though criminals were in the habit of loitering in the place where they have just committed a crime; that he was handling with apparent impunity stuff that was supposed to kill those who 'got it on their clothes'; and many other equally strange improbabilities. But the strangest and most dreadful feature of all was that such things did not seem improbable to the official who interrogated the accused; that he asked for no explanations. Or, if he did, it is still worse that no mention of this was made in the trial.

The people of the neighbourhood hurriedly began to apply burning straw to the walls to burn off heaven knows how much dirt that had probably been there, under their eyes, for heaven knows how long before panic brought it to their notice. Giangiacomo Mora, the barber at the corner of the street, agreed with the rest that the walls of his house had been smeared; unaware, poor wretch, of the very different danger that threatened him from the aforesaid and, as it turned out, equally unlucky Commissioner of the Sanità.

The story told by the two women was quickly enriched with fresh details—unless perhaps what they were afterwards to say to the Chief of Police did not exactly tally with what they had said to their neighbours. The son of the unfortunate Mora, on being asked later 'whether he knew for himself, or had heard, how the said Commissioner smeared the walls and houses', answered, 'I heard that one of the women who live in the arch that crosses Via Vedra[1] (I don't know her name) said that he smeared with a pen, having a small jar in his hand.' And very likely Caterina Rosa did mention having seen a pen in the man's hand; and as for her 'small jar', its nature may easily be guessed; to a mind obsessed with smearing a pen must have seemed much more directly related to jars than inkpots.

Unfortunately, however, all the babble and chatter conveyed this much truth, that the man was a Commissioner of the Sanità, a clue which pointed at once to a certain Guglielmo Piazza,

[1] Via Vetra was the correct name. Via *Vedra* was the dialect form, and so used only when citing the words of witnesses. [Tr.]

son-in-law of a well-known midwife of the neighbourhood called Paola. The news spread to other quarters of the city, carried in part by someone who had happened to find himself where the hubbub began. It came to the ears of the Senate, which at once ordered the Chief of Police to collect information and take such action as was required. 'A report has come to the Senate,' said the Chief of Police to the notary whom he took with him on his investigations, 'that yesterday morning the walls and houses of Via Vedra de' Cittadini were smeared with a deadly paste.' With these words—so full already of a lamentable assurance, passing as they did, without the slightest correction, from the populace to the authorities—the case was opened.

So firm a conviction, such insane terror of a crime that was never committed may well remind my readers of events which took place a few years ago, in various parts of Europe, at the time of the cholera epidemic; but there is this difference, that in the latter case no one with any education (with a few exceptions) showed a like disastrous credulity; indeed most people did what they could to make sanity prevail. And no one was arrested by the authorities on suspicion of similar 'crimes', unless it was to save the person suspected from the fury of the mob. A great improvement, certainly; but even were it greater, even if one could be sure that similar pretexts would never again give rise to the same sort of persecution, yet one cannot be certain that the danger of such follies—which would differ indeed as to their subject matter, but not necessarily as to their mode of expression—is altogether a thing of the past. Men can, alas, deceive themselves, and terribly deceive themselves, on much less absurd presuppositions. A similar fear and fury can equally well be provoked by evils that may really be, and sometimes are, an effect of human depravity; but fear and fury, when not controlled by reason and charity, are unhappily liable, on the flimsiest pretexts and following the wildest assertions, to presume the guilt of men who are simply unfortunate. For example, not so long ago—a little before the cholera epidemic—when there was an outbreak of arson in Normandy, what was it led the mob to fix the guilt, immediately, on one particular

man? Simply that he was the first to be found on the spot or near it; that he was a stranger and could give no satisfactory account of himself (a thing doubly difficult when a man is terrified and his interrogators angry); that he was accused by a woman of the type of Caterina Rosa and by a boy who, himself suspected of being an accomplice and being ordered to say who had told him to start the fires, gave the first name that came into his head. Happy the juries appointed to try the accused (when there *was* a trial, for more than once in fact the mob gave effect to its own judgement) if they entered the court fully persuaded that so far they knew nothing at all; if their minds were deaf to the clamour outside; if their thought was not: 'We are the People' (one of those abstractions which only too often blind men to the particular and proper nature of the facts before them, and are especially odious and cruel when the People have already made up their ignorant minds on the matter)—but rather: 'We are a group of men entrusted with the sacred, necessary, and fearful authority—and with this authority only—of deciding whether other men are guilty or innocent.'

The man whom the Chief of Police had been advised to interrogate had nothing to say, except that on the previous day he had seen people scorching the walls of Via della Vetra, and that he had heard that these had been smeared that morning by 'the son-in-law of midwife Paola'. The Chief, with his notary, went to the place indicated, saw the fire-blackened walls, and noticed that those of one house, the barber Mora's, had just been whitewashed. And they too were told, by people there, the reason for the scorching: the walls had been smeared. 'The Chief of Police and I,' wrote the notary, 'saw, in fact, on the burnt patches traces of a yellowish pasty stuff, as if someone had been smearing with his fingers.' What a way to check evidence of crime!

A woman of the Tradate household was questioned: she had found the walls of the street 'dirtied with some yellow stuff, a lot of it'. Caterina Rosa and Ottavia Bono were questioned, and we know how they replied. Some other persons were questioned

who had nothing to say that threw any light on the facts; among these, the wayfarer who had met and greeted the Commissioner of the Sanità; asked whether he had then seen dirt on the walls of Via Vedra he said, 'I didn't look, because nothing had yet been said about it.'

An order was already out for the arrest of Piazza, and this was easily effected. On the same day, the 22nd, 'one of the Baricello di Campagna guard reported to the aforesaid Chief of Police, the latter being still in his carriage on the way home . . . how he had found the aforesaid Guglielmo standing at the doorway of the Lord Senator Monti, President of the Sanità, and had taken him off to prison as ordered'. That this evident unconsciousness of peril on the part of the Commissioner did nothing to diminish the judges' suspicion of him is a fact that can certainly not be explained away by the ignorance of those times. Those judges knew that the flight of a suspected person was technically an indication of guilt; odd then that this man's *not* fleeing, and so obviously not fleeing, was not taken as indicating the contrary! But it is ridiculous to insist that what could *not* have been seen *could* have been seen; one can always choose not to consider what one sees.

Piazza's house was then thoroughly searched, *in omnibus arcis, capsis, scriniis, cancellis, sublectis,* for jars of paste and for money. Nothing was found; *nihil penitus compertum fuit.* But not even this was of the least use to him, as became only too clear at his first examination, that very day, by the Chief of Police, assisted by an auditor supplied, probably, by the Tribunal of the Sanità.

He was questioned about his profession, his usual occupations, the walk he had taken the previous day, the clothes he had been wearing. Finally he was asked: 'Whether he knew anything about any fouling of the walls of the houses of the city, especially in the neighbourhood of Porta Ticinese.' He answered: 'I know nothing about it; I never spend any time by Porta Ticinese.' They replied, 'Not plausible'; they wanted to prove he knew something. Four times they asked, four times he gave the same answer in different words. They then passed to other matters,

but keeping the same end in view. And we shall see why presently; we shall see what cruel cunning was concealed in their insistence on that 'implausibility', and then in their change of ground.

Among the events of the previous day mentioned by Piazza in his replies was his having met with some 'parochial deputies' —gentlemen chosen from each parish by the Tribunal of the Sanità to see that its orders were carried out. Asked for the names of these deputies, Piazza answered that he knew them only by sight, not by name. Again the reply came, 'implausible'. But to make the full—and fearful—meaning of this word clear I must ask the reader now to bear with some rather general considerations on the criminal law procedure of those times. I shall be as brief as the matter allows.

CHAPTER TWO

As everyone knows, that procedure was regulated principally, both in this country and nearly everywhere else in Europe, by the authority of the writers on the law; and for the simple reason that in most cases it was the only authority available. For the absence of any accepted legal system framed for society as a whole had two consequences: that those who interpreted the law became in effect its makers; and that their authority to do so was pretty generally admitted. When what needs doing is left undone by those whose business it is to do it—or, if done at all is incompetently done—then there will always be found people who think they can supply the lack, and others who are prepared to accept whatever is provided, regardless of who provides it. Nothing is harder and more wearisome than to live without rules of some kind.

For example, the Statutes of Milan laid down no other rules or conditions with regard to the power to torture a man accused of crime (a power itself admitted implicitly by everybody, as a natural consequence of the right to put such a man on trial) than that the accusation be supported by public opinion; that

the crime in question be punishable by death; and that there be some evidence of guilt—the degree of evidence being, however, left vague. On this last point the Roman law itself, which operated in cases not foreseen by the Statutes, was no more precise, though it had more to say. 'The judges,' it declared, 'must not begin with torture; they must first have recourse to arguments both plausible and probative. But if, having weighed the matter, they consider that they have sufficient grounds to warrant the use of torture in order to find out the truth, then let them use it, having regard to the condition of the accused.'[1] In fact the Roman law explicitly left it to the judges' discretion to decide as to the quality and force of the evidence in each case; and this power of the judiciary was presupposed by the old Statutes of Milan.

The so-called New Constitutions, promulgated by order of Charles V, do not even mention torture; and thenceforward, down to the period of our trial and for a long while after, though many decrees were passed inflicting torture as a punishment, there was not one, so far as I know, that regulated its use as a means of obtaining proof.

And here again the reason is not far to seek. What was at first an effect had become a cause; a substitute had been found, here as elsewhere, for the legislative authority, and especially in the sphere of judicial procedure; a substitute that operated in such a way as to make the need for any intervention of that authority to be felt less and less, to the point of being almost forgotten. The writers on the law, particularly from the time that mere commentaries on Roman law began to go out of fashion and works of a more independent character, whether on criminal procedure as a whole or on this or that special point, began to increase, these writers took to elaborating their material systematically and at the same time with a minute attention to detail; creating new laws by reinterpretations of the old; extending their application by comparing case with case, and so drawing general rules out of particular decisions. And where all this still seemed insufficient they provided rules of their own in line

[1] *Codex*, IX, tit. 41, 'De quaestionibus', l. 8.

with what they thought reason or equity or natural law required; and doing this sometimes concordantly—one writer copying and quoting the others—and sometimes not. And the result was that the judges—men trained in the subject and sometimes themselves writers of this kind—came to have to hand, in almost every case and for every detail of each case, a set of ready-made conclusions to follow or to choose from. Law, in fact, had become a body of knowledge, a science. And it was to this science, that is, to the Roman law so interpreted, and to such ancient customs of various regions as had not been obliterated by the authority of Roman law, and were interpreted in the same way, as well as to such customs as were approved by the jurists, along with the latters' precepts now become customary, it was to all this that the name 'Law' came to be almost exclusively applied; whereas the acts of the ruling authority in the State were merely entitled 'orders', 'decrees', 'proclamations', and so forth, and had about them an air of things vaguely contingent and temporary. To give one example, the proclamations of the government of Milan (which was certainly a legislative authority) were valid only so long as a particular government held office; so that the first act of its successor was always provisionally to confirm them. Each *gridario*, as it was called, was a sort of Praetor's Edict made for the time being, as the occasion required. But legal science, on the other hand, was continually operative and over the whole field. It developed indeed and changed, but only by degrees too small to be noticed. Those who were masters in it had always started their careers as pupils. One might almost call it a continual revision, in part a continual recompilation, of the original Twelve Tables, entrusted, or rather relinquished, to a perpetual Decemvirate.

Now this age-long and extensive authority of private persons over public law came in time to be regarded—and, if I am not mistaken, is still regarded—as a thing anomalous in itself and pernicious in its effects; especially in the sphere of the criminal law, and more particularly in that of the procedure of the courts. Opposition to it began when men became aware of the desira-

bility and the possibility of abolishing it and of replacing it by a new legal system more complete and precise and logical than the old. Yet we have seen that the old system was in its way a natural product; nor had it arisen as a novelty, but rather as a sort of extraordinary extension of a phenomenon as old as the hills and destined perhaps, in one form or another, to go on forever: for let laws be as precise as you please, they will always, perhaps, require interpretation; and perhaps judges will always be inclined—at one time more, at another less—to have recourse, for the law's interpretation, to writers who have established themselves as the acknowledged experts on the subject as a whole. And for my part I am not at all sure that, on a calmer and more thorough examination of the facts, we should not have to conclude that the authority of those old jurists was, relatively and comparatively speaking, beneficial; for the state of affairs that preceded it had been far worse.

For after all it is improbable that men accustomed to take into consideration a great number of possible cases, and to endeavour to regulate these either by existing positive law or by more general and higher principles, should recommend procedures more unjust and more unreasonable, more violent and more capricious than such as are only too likely to commend themselves to an authority which deals *ad hoc* with one case after another, in a field so wide open to emotional influences. The very number of volumes and authors, the multiplicity and ever-increasing particularization of the rules they prescribed are themselves some indication of a desire at work to set limits to the play of arbitrary power and to guide it, so far as was possible in those times, towards reason and justice. Men do not need such minute instructions on how to abuse power. If you want a horse to run wild, you don't lecture him on the art of running; just off with his bridle, if he has one!

But so it is as a rule with reforms that are brought in by degrees (I mean real reforms, not everything so named). To those who first embark on a course of reform some slight alteration of the *status quo* seems already much—a correcting this or that particular abuse, an adding here, a removing there. But

for those who come on the scene later, and sometimes much later, and who find, rightly, much still to blame in the system as it stands, it is only too easy to stop short at a superficial judgement as to the causes of the system; to denounce as its creators those whose name it bears, and which it bears only because they were the men who gave it the form in which it continues to exist and be powerful. And a mistake such as this was made, I think, by the author of *Osservazioni sulla tortura,* along with other distinguished men of his time. It was almost an enviable mistake, the kind of error that sometimes accompanies great and beneficent innovations. But the force and cogency with which Pietro Verri demonstrated the irrationality, injustice, and cruelty of the hideous practice of torture was only equalled by the rashness, as I would call it, with which he attributed all that was worst in it to the authority of those writers of the law. And certainly it is not as claiming any superiority to so justly celebrated a man, nor as ignoring the nobility of his work, that I venture to criticize Verri on this point. It is merely that I have had the luck to be born later and that I have the advantage (taking as my principal theme a point which for him was quite secondary) of being able to study dispassionately, and with an eye to its effects as a whole and in its historical setting, a system which he had to challenge at a time when it still held the field and stood as a powerful obstacle to novel and urgently-needed reforms. And in any case the matter I speak of here is so much part and parcel of our common theme that neither he nor I could avoid discussing it—not Verri, because, the authority of the writers on the law being acknowledged by the men responsible for that iniquitous sentence of the court of Milan, he regarded it as an accomplice and part cause of the iniquity itself; not I, because, having closely studied what this authority prescribed and taught, I am in a position to use it as a subsidiary but very important standard of comparison to bring out the *peculiar* iniquity, as I would call it, of that sentence.

'It is certain,' wrote Verri (his judgement a little disturbed by strong feeling), 'that our laws give no ruling as to who may be

tortured, nor as to the circumstances which may justify torture, nor as to the manner of its application (whether by burning, dislocation, or wounding), nor as to the duration of the agony, nor as to the number of times it may be repeated. All this tormenting of human beings depends purely on a decision of the judge, guided by nothing but the teaching of the aforesaid criminal jurists.'[2]

But those laws of ours explicitly prescribed torture; and not our laws only but those of a great part of Europe, not to mention the Roman law which for so long had the name and authority of a universal code; all explicitly prescribed torture.[3] Hence the real question is whether the writings of the interpreters (as I shall call the old jurists, to distinguish them from those who were to have the merit, and the good fortune, of finally discrediting them), whether these writings were such as to tend to make torture more or less cruel than it actually was in the hands of the judges to whom the law almost entirely, in fact, committed its execution. And the strongest argument in those writers' favour is hinted at, to say the least, by Verri himself when he says: 'the same Farinaccio, speaking of things that occurred in his own time, says that the judges used to devise new tortures in order to gratify the pleasure they took in inflicting pain on those accused of crime, *judices qui propter delectationem quam habent torquendi reos inveniunt novas tormentorum species*'.[4]

I say in those writers' favour because such appeals to the judiciary to cease inventing new methods of torture—along with

[2] Verri, op. cit., c. xiii.

[3] England was an exception. In the English criminal courts the guilt or innocence of an accused person did not depend on his answers to interrogation; and this indirectly ruled out the cruel and deceptive method of extracting confession of guilt by torture. In the kingdom of Aragon, too, F. Casoni and A. Gomez bear witness to the fact that, at least in their day, torture was not employed; and the same can be said of Sweden, on the evidence of J. Loccenio as quoted by O. Tabor. I do not know whether any other European country was immune from this evil, or had succeeded in getting rid of it, before the eighteenth century.

[4] Verri, op. cit., c. viii. Farinacci, *Praxis et theoria criminalis*, I, tit. 5, Q. xxxviii, 56.

other more general reproaches and complaints which bear witness both to the ingenious and unbridled cruelty of those who had the power to pass sentence and to a desire, at least, to expose this cruelty and stop it—are to be found not in Farinacci only but pretty generally in nearly all the writings of the criminal jurists. The very words quoted above were borrowed by Farinacci from an earlier writer, Francesco da Bruno, who in turn took them from another still earlier, Angelo d'Arezzo, together with other and yet stronger expressions which I give here in translation: 'corrupt and savage judges whom God will punish; men of crass stupidity too, whose doings are abhorrent to every enlightened and virtuous mind'.[5] Again, as early as the thirteenth century, earlier than any of the writers already cited, we find Guido da Suzara declaring his desire 'to put some check on the excessive cruelty of the judges' (this in a discussion of torture where the writer refers to a rescript of Constans on the detention of criminals).[6] Again, in the century following, Baldo turned the famous rescript of Constantine about masters who killed their slaves against 'judges who mangle the bodies of prisoners in order to extort confession of guilt'; if the prisoner, he says, dies under torture the judge should be beheaded for murder.[7] Later, Paride dal Pozzo inveighed against those 'blood-thirsty judges who love to inflict torture, not as a just retribution for crime, nor to deter others from crime, but only to exalt themselves (*propter gloriam eorum*). They are no better than murderers.'[8] Again, Giulio Claro writes: 'let the judge beware of applying strange tortures not approved by custom; otherwise he were better called a butcher than a judge'.[9] 'We must vehemently denounce,' says Antonio Gomez, 'those pitiless judges who devise new tortures for prisoners brought before them; their motive is mere vainglory and self-interest.'[10] What

[5] Fr. da Bruno, *De indiciis et tortura*, Part 2, Q. ii, 7.
[6] G. de Suzaria, *De indiciis et tortura*, 1.
[7] B. de Ubaldis, commenting on *Codex*, IX, tit. 14, 3.
[8] P. de Puteo, *De Syndicatu*, 'Crudelitas officialis', 5.
[9] J. Clarus, *Sententiarum receptarum*, V, Q. lxiv, 36.
[10] A. Gomez, *Commentariorum variarumque resolut.*, III, c. 13, 5.

a motive for glory! What charmingly appropriate feelings! To enjoy inflicting pain on a fellow man and take pride in humiliating one who lies at your mercy! But at least the writers who drew attention to such motives cannot be supposed to have favoured them.

Let me remark in passing, *à propos* of these texts and of others that I shall adduce, that in all the relevant literature known to me I have not found a single complaint against a judge for using torture too leniently. Should a text of this kind be brought to my notice I would regard it as a genuine curiosity.

Some of the authors I have cited or shall cite are included in a list drawn up by Verri of 'writers who, if they had expressed their inhuman principles in plain language, and their careful descriptions of nicely calculated torments in a style less insufferably barbarous to any sensitive and civilized reader, could hardly have escaped that abhorrence and contempt with which we regard tortures themselves'.[11] Well, certainly the things these authors describe are quite horrible; and the things they acquiesced in we rightly abhor; but whether what they themselves contributed, or wished to contribute, to the system be matter for abhorrence and contempt is a question concerning which there may, even on the evidence so far adduced, be two opinions.

In their books—or rather in some of them—you will find, it is true, the various methods of torture set out in greater detail than they appear in the legal codes; but as accepted and customary practices, not as inventions of our authors. And Ippolito Marsigli, a jurist and judge of the fifteenth century who gives, in part from his own experience, a ghastly and grotesque and disgusting list of such methods, nevertheless calls those judges 'bestial' who seek to devise new ones.[12]

Again, it was, to be sure, these writers who brought up the question how often a torture might be repeated; but, as we shall see, they did so precisely to set some limits and conditions on arbitrary power; taking advantage of the vagueness and am-

[11] Op. cit., c. xiii.

[12] H. de Marsiliis, *Ad tit. Digest. de quaestionibus*; § 'In criminibus', 29.

biguity of Roman law on this point. Again, it was they who discussed the length of time appropriate to each application of a given torture; but once more, this was to impose limits, to put some control (the law itself putting none) on the tireless cruelty of 'certain judges, as ignorant as they are wicked, who will go on torturing a man for a space of three or four hours'. So wrote Farinacci,[13] and a century earlier Marsigli had inveighed against 'unjust judges, infamous wretches from the dregs of society, ignorant, worthless, brutal: when they get a man in their power (through no fault perhaps of his own, *forte indebite*) they refuse to speak to him until he is actually under torture, and if he does not reply as they wish they leave him hanging at the rope's end all day and night'.[14]

The reader will have noticed, in these passages and in others I have quoted, that the idea of cruelty is linked with that of ignorance. Knowledge, no less than conscience, is invoked on the side of moderation, humanity, kindness—all infuriating words I admit, in a context such as this, but they do at least show that those who used them aimed at taming the monster, not goading it on.

As for the statement that 'our laws' gave no rulings as to who could be subjected to torture, I cannot see that this matters in view of the relative abundance of directives on this unsavoury point provided by the Roman law, which was in effect ours also.

Verri continues his indictment:

> Ignorant and brutal men, indifferent to those questions of principle without a firm grasp of which it is impossible to frame a system of laws in harmony with nature and reason and conducive to the good of society; men who never thought of asking themselves whence comes the right to punish crime, or what is the purpose of punishment, or how to gauge the gravity of crimes and their relation to punishment, or whether a man may ever be constrained to surrender his right to self-defence. Men of no standing in society, mere private individuals, they took it on themselves to elaborate with ignoble subtlety a system for inflicting the maximum pain on their fellow men, and then

[13] Op. cit., Q. xxxviii, 54.

[14] *Practica causarum criminalium*; § 'Expedita', 86.

solemnly to publish their conclusions with all the impassivity of physicians recommending remedies for disease. And such men were set up as authorities, nay as legislators; and the books in which they give careful instructions as to how to dislocate living bodies and how precisely to prolong its agonies and add pain to pain, these inhuman writings found a welcome in all legal libraries and were seriously and calmly studied.

But really, is it credible that men of no social standing or culture—I mean, social standing in their own day and culture by the standards of their time—should have been allowed so much authority? For the question is necessarily a relative one; it is not whether those writers were as enlightened as one would wish legislators to be, but whether they were more or less so than the men who had formerly applied, indeed to a large extent invented, the law on their own bare authority. And as between a man who works out theories in the abstract and then debates them in public, and a man who executes his arbitrary decisions in private, which after all is the more 'brutal'?

As for Verri's series of questions, it would be extremely awkward if the first one, 'Whence comes the right to punish crime?', had to be answered before anyone could draft a reasonably satisfactory penal code. No doubt Verri's contemporaries thought they had found the right answer, but today the question is more than ever disputed—and a good thing too, for it is better to be perplexed and uncertain than peacefully in error. And the other questions, those of more immediate and practical importance, were they answered and answered correctly, had they even been examined and discussed, when our writers came on the scene? Are we to believe that the emergence of these writers upset some juster and more humane system? That their follies replaced a long heritage of wisdom? Put out of court a better reasoned and more reasonable jurisprudence? The answer, obviously, is No; and this suffices for my immediate argument. But I could wish that some competent scholar would take the matter further; would examine, that is, whether it was not on the contrary our jurists who, just because they were

private persons and not legislators, and so were perforce obliged to back their conclusions with reasons, whether they were not in fact the first to seek to relate the whole matter to general principles, by collecting and co-ordinating such principles as lay scattered through the body of Roman law and seeking to complete them by others drawn from the abstract idea of justice; whether it was not these writers who, in their endeavour to form a complete and coherent system of criminal practice out of old and new materials, did in fact adumbrate the concept and indicate the possibility—and in part the pattern—of a complete and coherent criminal law; whether, in short, their conception of an ideal order in this matter did not open the way to other writers—by whom they have been too summarily condemned—to conceive the idea of a general reform.

As for the accusation, so sweeping and unqualified, that our authors 'took it on themselves to elaborate with ignoble subtlety a system for inflicting the maximum pain', we have seen, on the contrary, that this is what most of them expressly detested and did their utmost to prevent. Many too of the texts cited could serve to acquit them of a cold impassivity in their treatment of the matter; let me quote once more from Farinacci: 'I cannot contain my fury against the judges who keep a man bound in chains day after day before putting him to torture; this is adding cruelty to cruelty.'[15] Words that seem to protest in advance against Verri's charge.

In fact, from the evidence adduced and from all we know of the practice of torture in its latest period, we can in all sincerity conclude that the interpreters of the criminal law left that practice a great deal less barbarous than they found it. It would of course be absurd to attribute this improvement to one cause alone, but it also seems to me unreasonable not to reckon among its many causes the censures and warnings repeated publicly, time and again down the centuries, by writers who, as their critics themselves point out, did have a certain authority over the practice of the courts.

Verri goes on to cite some of their statements, though not

[15] Op. cit., Q. xxxviii, 38.

enough to support a general historical judgement, even were these all cited accurately. Here, for example, is an important one cited inaccurately: 'Claro asserts that, to put a man to torture, it suffices that there is some evidence against him.'[16] If Claro had really said that, it would be an oddity rather than an argument, so much opposed is it to what a host of other interpreters said. But in fact Claro says just the contrary. Verri was probably misled by a misprint: he read *nam sufficit adesse aliqua indicia contra reum ad hoc ut torqueri possit,*[17] instead of the *non sufficit,* etc., which I find in two earlier editions of the text. But in order to become aware of his error Verri did not need to compare texts; he had only to continue reading the one before his eyes, which goes on: 'if such evidence be not legally proved', a phrase which would clash with the antecedent clause if this were in the affirmative. And note how Claro continues:

> I have said that it does not suffice that there is evidence *(dixi quoque non sufficere)*; but even legal proof does not make such evidence sufficient, if this be not of a kind sufficient to justify torture; which is a point that God-fearing judges ought always to bear in mind lest they inflict torture unjustly. And if they do such injustice then they themselves must answer to the court of appeal; and de Afflictis tells of a reply that he made to King Frederick, that not even the king had authority to order a judge to put a man to the torture, against whom there was no sufficient evidence.

So speaks Claro, and his words make it pretty clear that Verri has misunderstood another sentence which he renders as follows: 'As to what torture has to do with evidence of guilt, there being no definite rule, everything is left to the decision of the judge.'[18] Verri understands this as allowing an absolute authority to the judiciary. But the contradiction would be too

[16] Op. cit., c. viii.

[17] Clarus, op. cit., V, Q. lxiv, 12. The corrected reading 'non sufficit', which Manzoni found in Venice editions of 1580 and 1595, appears also in the Lyons edition of 1590. [Tr.]

[18] Op. cit., c. viii.

glaring if this were the true meaning of Claro's words; and it becomes, if anything, still more so in the light of another passage: 'although it belongs to the judge to give judgement, he must respect the common norms of justice . . . and let the agents of justice take care not to proceed too boldly, on the pretext that the decision lies with them'.[19]

What then is the sense of that *remittitur arbitrio judicis* which Verri renders as 'everything is left to the decision of the judge'?

It means . . . but good heavens, why look for Claro's personal opinion in these words? In writing them he was merely repeating a commonplace, a conventional tag that turns up in all these writers. Bartolo refers to it as a commonplace: *Doctores communiter dicunt quod in hoc* (the question of what evidence suffices to justify torture) *non potest dari certa doctrina, sed relinquitur arbitrio judicis.*[20] And for the jurists this was simply a matter of fact, not of theory or principle: since in fact the law did not specify the evidence required, it left this to the judge to decide in each case. So Guido da Suzara, writing about a century before Bartolo, after stating or repeating the same *dictum,* that the decision as to the evidence was left to the judge, adds, 'as, in general, every matter that the law leaves undetermined'.[21] Again, to cite a later authority, Paride dal Pozzo, having repeated the same formula, comments: 'where neither law nor custom has fixed the procedure, the wisdom of the judge must supply the defect; which is why this matter of evidences lays a grave responsibility on his conscience'.[22] And finally Bossi, a fifteenth-century writer on criminal law and a Senator of Milan, writes: 'judgement here only means (*in hoc consistit*) that the judge can look for no definite ruling from the law, which merely states that he must begin with probable and plausible arguments. His business, then, is to discover whether a given piece of evidence is plausible and probable'.[23]

[19] Clarus, op. cit., V, Q. lxiv, 13.
[20] Bartolus de Saxoferrato, *Ad lib. Digest.* XLVIII, tit. 18, l. 22.
[21] *De tormentis,* 30.
[22] *De Syndicatu,* 'Mandavit', 5, 18.
[23] Aegidius Bossi, *Tractatus varii,* 'De indiciis ante torturam', 32.

In short, what they called 'decision' or 'judgement' was the same as what later, to avoid ambiguities, came to be called discretionary power; a thing which, though dangerous, is inevitable in the application of laws whether good or bad, and which a wise legislator will always endeavour, not to abolish, for that would be impossible, but to limit to certain well-defined circumstances of minor importance; restricting its application, as far as possible, even in these. And such, I venture to say, was the aim from first to last of our laborious interpreters, and particularly in the matter of torture where the law left a terrifying range of power to the judges. Thus Bartolo, after the words I quoted above, adds, 'but I will give such rules as I can'. Others before him had given rules, and his successors in their turn added more, some proposing rules of their own, others recalling and approving those of their predecessors; but none omitting to repeat the formula which expressed the law as it stood in fact; for they were, after all, only the law's interpreters.

But with the passing of time and as their work progressed, they began to express a desire that the formula itself be modified. We can see this in Farinacci, who wrote after the authors I have been citing in the last few paragraphs, but before the period of the trial that we are studying, when he was reckoned a major authority. After repeating and confirming with a great parade of authorities, the principle that a judge's power of decision 'must not be regarded as free and absolute but as bound by justice and equity'; after deducing and confirming, with more authorities, the consequence that 'the judge ought to lean towards mercy, conform his judgement to the general tenor of the law and the teaching of approved authors, and refrain from manipulating evidence as he pleases'; after discussing, at greater length I think, and more systematically than anyone had hitherto done, the kinds of relevant evidence, Farinacci concludes in these terms: 'Thus it appears that the traditionally accepted ruling of learned authorities—that whether the evidence justifies torture is to be left to the free decision of the judges—has been so much and so concordantly limited by the same authorities that not without reason many

jurists maintain that the contrary ruling should hold, namely that this assessment of the evidence should never be subject to the judge's decision.'[24] And he cites Francesco Casoni: 'It is a common error of judges to think that whether torture is to be used or not depends entirely on their own good pleasure; as though Nature had formed the bodies of prisoners only that judges might torment them at will.'[25]

With these words we come in sight of an important moment in the history of legal science. This science is now taking stock of its achievements and is claiming that the time has come to give effect to its findings. Not that it declares openly for reform; it did not presume so far, nor would such presumption have been tolerated. But, declaring itself a real co-operator with the positive law, and appealing in support of its own authority to that of a higher, eternal law, it admonishes the judges to conform their practice to its findings; and this both for the sake of those who would otherwise suffer without cause and for the sake of the judges themselves, who would otherwise be guilty of shameful injustice. We may think these efforts rather pathetic, applied as they were to a practice which of its nature could never be made acceptable; but they do at least make nonsense of Verri's contention that 'what is horrible is not merely the suffering caused by torture . . . but also the teaching of the jurists on the circumstances attending its application'.[26]

I have not space to examine all the texts quoted by Verri, though a thorough treatment of the question would require this and more: but I may be allowed one last observation. It concerns his reference to Claro in the following passage:

> Let one horror stand for all, one that we learn of from Claro, the celebrated Milanese jurist and a main authority on this matter. 'When a woman,' he writes, 'is in prison as under suspicion of some crime, the judge concerned with her case has the right to have her brought secretly to his room and there caress her and make pretended love

[24] Op. cit., Q. xxxvii, 193–200.
[25] Fr. Casoni, *Tractatus de tormentis*, c. i, 10.
[26] Op. cit., c. viii.

to her, promising her freedom on condition she confess her guilt. It was thus that a certain judge induced a young woman to confess the crime of murder and so was able to have her beheaded.' And lest anyone imagine that I exaggerate in recounting this horrible violation of religion and virtue and the most sacred principles of human life, here are Claro's very words: *Paris dicit quod judex potest*, etc.[27]

Horrible indeed: but what are the facts? In the first place, this Paris (Paride dal Pozzo) was not stating a private opinion; he was recounting, and alas with approval, something actually done by a judge, one of a thousand misdeeds caused by the arbitrary power of the judiciary and without the slightest encouragement from the jurists. In the second place, observe that Baiardi, who mentions this opinion in his supplement to Claro (Claro himself does not refer to it), does so only in order to express his abhorrence and to denounce the judge in question as a 'diabolical deceiver'.[28] In the third place, Baiardi cites not a single other author in support of Paride's opinion during the hundred years that elapsed between Paride and himself. And it would be stranger still to find it upheld in any later period. And as for Paride, heaven preserve us from calling him, as Giannone does, an 'excellent jurist', but other words of his which I have already quoted suffice to show that even he is not quite fairly represented by the deplorable passage to which Verri refers.

In all this I do not of course claim to have proved that the teaching of the interpreters of the law, taken as a whole, was not a factor making for evil, as having been turned to evil uses. A most interesting question this—involving as it does an assessment of the aims and general effects of intellectual labours that extended over several centuries and had to do with matters of vital importance for mankind. It is a question, really, for our own generation to answer, for, as I have already remarked and as indeed everyone knows, the generation that is actually engaged in overturning a system is not in the best position to write its history. But that answer cannot be given, that history cannot

[27] Op. cit., c. viii.

[28] *Ad Clari Sentent. recept.*, V, Q. lxiv, 24; additions 80, 81.

be written in a few disconnected observations such as I have offered in this chapter. Let these serve, however, as I think they will, to show that the view of the matter I criticized was one too hastily adopted. In a way, too, they introduce the narrative that follows, for in the course of this we shall often have occasion to regret that the authority of the writers on the law was not more effective. Indeed I feel sure that my readers will finally join with me in saying, 'If only they had been obeyed!'

CHAPTER THREE

To return now to the trial. It was the usual, almost universal teaching of the law-writers that if an accused man lied to the judge who was interrogating him this amounted to 'legitimate evidence', as they called it, sufficient to justify torture. Hence the reply made to the unfortunate Piazza, under interrogation, that it was 'not plausible' that he should not have heard of the fouling of the walls around Porta Ticinese, nor have known the names of those deputies whom he had met.

But did any lie suffice?

'To constitute evidence sufficient to justify torture the lie must be connected with the nature of the crime and its essential circumstances (namely such as pertain to the crime in such a way that it could be inferred from them). Otherwise it does not suffice: *alias secus*.' Again: 'A lie is not relevant to the question of torture if it concern matters which would not be to the disadvantage of the accused had he confessed them.'[1]

Moreover, was it enough, in the view of the same authorities, to justify torture, if it merely seemed to the judge that the accused had lied?

'To be evidence justifying torture the lie must be conclusively proved, either by the accused's own confession or by two witnesses . . . , it being commonly accepted that two witnesses are required to establish a piece of "remote evidence" such as a lie.'[2]

[1] Farinacci, op. cit., Q. lii, 11, 14. [2] Ibid., 13.

I am citing, and shall often cite, Farinacci, who was reckoned a major authority at that time and was a diligent collector of the more commonly held opinions. Some jurists, it is true, were content with only one witness, provided he or she were thoroughly trustworthy. But that a lie had to be proved by the forms of law, and could not rest merely on the judge's conjecture, was common doctrine contradicted by no one.

These conditions were deduced from the clause in the Roman law which forbade the judge to begin a trial with torture (the things men have to forbid, once other things are allowed !).

> If the judges [wrote Farinacci] were authorized to use torture on prisoners in the absence of legitimate and sufficient evidence, this would amount to allowing them to begin with torture. . . . And by legitimate evidence is meant such as is plausible and probable; not trivial indications nor mere formalities, but weighty, serious, certain, and clear evidence—clear as daylight, as people say. . . . It is a question of handing a man over to torture, and to torture that might prove fatal *(agitur de hominis salute)*. Do not wonder then, you severe judges, that the law and the men learned in it require evidence so precise and so definite, and have expressed this requirement so emphatically and so often.[3]

I would not say, to be sure, that such pronouncements as these were rational. How could they be? They involved self-contradiction. They represented a hopeless attempt to combine certainty and uncertainty; an endeavour to avoid the risk of torturing the innocent and of extorting false confessions of guilt, while at the same time admitting torture as precisely the means for discovering whether a man was innocent or guilty by compelling him to confess his guilt. The logical consequence of the underlying intention would have been to say outright that torture was absurd and unjust: but against this stood the barrier of a blind reverence for antiquity and the Roman law. That little book *Dei delitti e delle pene,* which played a notable part not only in the abolition of torture but in the reform of all our criminal legislation, opened with these words: 'Certain

[3] Op. cit., Q. xxxvii, 2, 3, 4.

residues of the laws of a race of conquerors'; a phrase which at the time seemed (as indeed it was) audacious, the bold stroke of a brilliant mind; but a century earlier it would have seemed paradoxical to the point of extravagance. And no wonder: have we not seen a similar reverence survive still longer? First, and with even renewed power, in politics, then in literature, and finally in some branches of the fine arts. There comes a moment, in great matters as in small, when something which men have striven, despite its contingency and artificiality, to perpetuate as natural and necessary, must at last succumb to experience, or to rational argument, or to mere satiety and change of fashion—or to some other factor, if any there be, more trivial even than fashion—according to the nature and relative importance of the matter in question. But that moment must be prepared for; and it stands a good deal to the credit of the old jurists if they did in fact, as I think they did, prepare for such a moment in the history of jurisprudence, however slowly and unwittingly they did so.

But in the case of our trial, even the rules by that time established were enough to convict the judges of definite illegality. For they chose in fact to begin with torture. Completely ignoring the circumstances, whether 'essential' or not, of the presumed crime, they bombarded their victim with questions from which nothing relevant could result, except only a pretext for them to say 'not plausible'; and, on this pretext—giving to asserted implausibilities the character of proved lies—to warn him that they would use torture. They were not in fact seeking the truth at all; their only object was to extort a confession. Uncertain of their advantage if they were to stop to examine the facts, they wanted as quickly as possible to inflict the pain which would give them a certain and swift advantage. They were in a hurry: all Milan knew (that is the word used in such cases) that Guglielmo Piazza had smeared the walls, doorways, and approaches of Via della Vetra—and those who had him in their power, couldn't *they* make him own up?

Someone may say perhaps that all this was justified, in law, at least, if not in conscience, by the principle—a revolting one

but accepted in those days—that when threatened by a crime of more than usual enormity the public authorities need not scruple to use illegal methods to suppress it. But in point of fact it was—and heaven knows, this was only right—the common, nay almost the universal opinion of the jurists that this principle did not apply to the actual process in court, but only to the punishment eventually imposed. As one of them expressed it, 'the enormity of the crime one may be concerned with is no proof that the accused committed it; and until such proof be shown, let all legal formalities be observed'.[4] And here I should like to put on record another text, if only because it seems to me to represent one of those moments that occur from time to time in history when a gleam of eternal justice itself shows through human speech. I refer to a phrase used early in the fifteenth century by Nicolò Tedeschi, Archbishop of Palermo, but more famous, so long as he had any fame, as the Abate Palermitano, and whom our ancestors called the 'Bartolo of Canon Law'. 'The graver the crime,' wrote this author, 'the stronger should be the proofs of guilt, for where the danger is greater there is the greater need of prudence.'[5] However, these texts do not—from the strictly legal point of view—apply to our case, for we have it on Claro's authority that in the practice of the courts of Milan a contrary custom prevailed—namely that in such cases (of especially grave crimes) the judge was permitted to set the law aside, even in examining the accused; 'A rule,' remarks Rimaldi, another erstwhile celebrated jurist, 'which other nations would do well not to adopt'—on which Farinacci comments, 'well said'.[6] But observe how Claro himself interprets this rule: 'Recourse is had to torture although the evidence be not altogether sufficient (*in totum sufficientia*), nor proved by altogether unimpeachable witnesses, and often also without having given the accused a copy of the minutes of the investigation.' But where he treats particularly of evidence that would justify torture, he expressly states the necessity of some such

[4] P. Folerius, *Pract. crim.*, § 'Quod suffocavit', 52.
[5] *Commentaria in libros decretalium*, 'De praesumptionibus', c. xiv, 3.
[6] Op. cit., Q. xxxvii, 79.

evidence—'not only in the case of petty crimes but for the greatest crimes too, not excluding high treason'.[7] Claro, then, allowed that certain cases called for a less thorough scrutiny of evidence, but not that it could ever be right to dispense with such scrutiny altogether. He allowed that in certain cases one might go ahead without witnesses of the highest character; not that there need be none at all; that the evidence could be slighter, but not that none need be adduced—and such as was adduced must, he insisted, be real and relevant. Claro, in short, aimed at making things easier for the judges in their task of discovering crime, but not at giving them power to torture, on whatever pretext they chose, whomsoever might fall into their hands. No abstract theory could ever allow, ever conceive, ever dream of conceiving such a power. The passions, however, are far more practical.

And so Piazza was warned by that unspeakable interrogator: 'Tell us the truth—the real reason why you say that you do not know that the walls have been smeared, and that you do not know the names of the deputies. Otherwise, these statements being implausible, we shall put you on the rope to discover the truth behind the implausibilities.' 'Hang me up if you want to, but I know nothing of the things you have asked me about.' So the poor wretch replied, with that sort of desperate courage with which reason will sometimes challenge violence as though to make it understand that, do what it will, violence can never change its nature and become reasonable.

And notice the paltry cunning of these gentlemen in finding an extra excuse for their proceedings by ferreting out a second 'lie', as though to have the term in the plural gave them more assurance—another zero to swell a sum which so far contained nothing else.

He was put to the torture. They said: 'Tell us the truth at last.' Howling and sobbing, praying and supplicating, he answered, 'My Lord, I have told the truth.' They persisted with their questions. 'Ah for the love of God,' he cried, 'let me down my Lord and I will tell all I know. . . . Give me a drop of water,

[7] *Sentent. recept.*, V, Q. lxiv, 9.

please.' He was let down, put in a chair, and questioned again. He again replied, 'I know nothing . . . give me some water, please.'

The blindness of panic! It never crossed their minds that from the very thing which they were determined to force Piazza to say he could have made a very strong argument in his defence—if it had been true, as they so cruelly insisted it was. 'Yes, sir,' he could have replied, 'I had heard that the walls of Via della Vetra had been smeared; and then I went and lounged about at the door of your house, my Lord President of the Sanità!' And the argument would have been all the stronger for the fact that the two rumours, of the smearing and of Piazza's responsibility for it, were going around together; so that Piazza must have been aware of his danger, along with the rumour of the smearing. But this obvious consideration, to which the minds of his judges were blinded by passion, could not occur to him either, poor fellow; because they had never told him what he was accused of. Before anything else they wanted to break his spirit with torture. It was this that represented for them the 'plausible and probable arguments' which the law required. They wanted to make him feel the terrible and immediate consequences of answering them in the negative; to make him admit himself a liar once, in order to gain the right not to believe him as soon as he should declare himself innocent. But this particular villainy did not succeed. Put to the torture again, lifted up on the rope, warned that the torture would be repeated, subjected to it again time after time, and continually pressed to 'tell the truth', Piazza's answer, screamed out at first and then spoken in a low voice, was always the same: 'I have told you the truth.' Until at last the judges, seeing that he was past giving any answer at all for the present, ordered him to be let down and taken back to prison.

On 23 June a report of this interrogation was made to the Senate by the President of the Sanità, himself a Senator, and by the Chief of Police (who could also sit in that assembly when invited). The Senate thereupon decreed, in its capacity as Supreme Court, that 'Piazza be shaved, given a purgative,

dressed in clothes provided by the court, and then tortured again', this time 'tied by the rope'—a very cruel addition, since it meant that now his hands, as well as arms, would be dislocated. This torture 'was to be repeated as often as the two aforesaid magistrates thought fit, because of certain lies and implausibilities which the trial has brought to light'.

The Senate alone had, I will not say the authority but the power, to take things so far with impunity. With regard to the repetition of tortures the Roman law was interpreted in two ways; and the legally weaker of the two was the more humane. Many authorities—perhaps following Odofredus, who is the only one quoted by Cino da Pistoia and the earliest quoted by the other writers who maintained this view—held that torture could not be repeated unless in the meantime new and weightier evidence had come to light; with, later, the added qualification that this evidence should be different in kind from that adduced in the first instance. On the other hand many writers followed Bartolo in holding that torture might be repeated if the original evidence were very plain, clear, and pressing; and if—again a condition added later—the first application of torture had been mild. Now clearly, neither of these interpretations had the slightest relevance to the Senate's decree. No new evidence had been shown. And what was the original evidence? That two women had observed Piazza touching a wall, and that (here 'evidence' and 'crime' became the same thing) the magistrates had seen 'some traces of oily material' on the scorched and blackened walls of a part of the street where in fact Piazza had not been! Moreover, these so evidently 'plain, clear, and pressing' signs of guilt had not been tried out or tested in any discussion with the accused. Discussion indeed! The Senate's decree makes no mention of evidence in regard to the crime: the decree was not even a misapplication of the law; it proceeded as though there were no law. In the teeth of all law and all accepted authorities, not to speak of all reason, it ordered that Piazza be tortured anew 'because of some lies and implausibilities'; that is to say, the Senate ordered its ministers to do again, and still more cruelly, what it ought to have punished them for doing in the

first place. For it was a universally admitted principle of jurisprudence (and how could it not have been?) that a subordinate judge who had put a man to torture without due evidence of guilt should be punished by his superiors.

But the Senate of Milan was the supreme court of justice (in this world, to be sure), and it would not do for the Senate of Milan—to which the public was looking, if not for protection, at least for revenge—it would never do for this body to be less adroit, persistent, successful in discovery than Caterina Rosa. For in fact the whole business was going forward under this woman's authority. They were her words which had started the trial on its course—'then it occurred to me that he might perhaps be one of the people', etc.—and the same words were still controlling and ruling it; except that, while she began with surmises, the judges began with assurance. And let us not be surprised to see a court of justice playing the eager disciple to a couple of illiterate women; for where passion calls the tune, it is only natural that the blind should be leaders. Nor need we be surprised to see men whom we cannot suppose to have been, indeed who certainly were not, of the kind that choose evil for its own sake, to see such men so cruelly and blatantly violate every rule of justice; for once a man allows himself to think unjustly he will proceed to act unjustly and continue down this path as far as the unjust thought can take him; and if conscience hesitates, and grows uneasy, and starts to send out warnings—well, it is all too easy for popular clamour to overwhelm all scruples, or even prevent any ever arising, in the mind of one who forgets that he has to answer to another judge.

As for the humiliating (to say the least) directions with regard to shaving, clothing, and purging the accused, they are sufficiently explained by Verri. 'It was the belief of those times,' he writes, 'that a criminal might have some diabolical charm or some pact with the devil concealed on his person, in the hair of his head or body, or in his clothes, or even in his stomach; so that shaving, stripping, and purging were employed to render him defenceless.'[8] And it is true, such was the belief of those

[8] Op. cit., c. iii.

times; and violation of human rights was a fact of those times, and is of all times, under one form or another; but was never at any time accepted in principle.

Piazza's second interrogation was only a repetition of the first one—just as absurd, still more cruel, and equally ineffective. The poor wretch was first questioned, his answers being contradicted with captious objections which one would call childish if such a term could apply to anything done in this affair; and the questions still bore on circumstances irrelevant to his presumed crime, about which he was still kept entirely in the dark. This done, they began to torture him again, and more cruelly, in obedience to the Senate's decree. All they obtained were cries of anguish, cries for mercy—not a word of what they desired to hear, and to extort which they had the nerve to cause such cries and to listen to them. 'Oh my God! Oh, my Lord, what are you doing to me . . . get it over quickly, at least . . . cut my hand off . . . let me die . . . give me at least a moment to breathe. . . . Ah, Lord President! For the love of God give me something to drink. . . .' Yet still, with all this: 'I don't know anything; I have told you the truth.' Having answered thus again and again, to their coldly and yet furiously repeated demand, 'Tell us the truth', Piazza's voice failed him, he went dumb; during four repetitions of the torture he was silent. Then, at last, he found strength to say once more in a low voice: 'I know nothing, I've already told you the truth.' And with this they had to make an end, and return him, unconfessed, to prison.

And now they no longer had any reason, any sort of pretext, for beginning again; they had taken a short cut and it had led them astray. Had the torture produced its effect of extorting the confession of a lie, they would have had Piazza at their mercy; and, horrible to say, the less important the subject of the lie, the more indifferent and trivial, the more effectively would it have served them as an argument of his guilt; as showing his need to keep clear of the whole business, to appear completely ignorant of it—in short, to lie. But, having tortured him once, illegally, and then again still more illegally and still more

savagely (or, to use their term, 'severely'), it would have been just a little too extravagant to begin a third time to torture a man for denying that he had heard certain rumours or known the names of some parish functionaries. So they were back at their starting point, as though nothing had yet been done; obliged after all, with nothing gained so far, to begin the investigation of the supposed crime, and therefore to tell Piazza what he was charged with and commence his cross-examination. And what if he denied the charge? What if, as he had shown himself able to do, he persisted in denying even under torture? And this torture would have had to be absolutely the last, unless the judges chose to bring on themselves the fearful judgement pronounced by a fellow judge, one who had died almost a century earlier but whose authority was stronger now than ever before—I mean that Bossi who has been quoted already: 'I have never,' said Bossi, 'known torture to be ordered more than three times, except by judges who were murderous brutes, *nisi a carneficibus*.'[9] And he meant torture ordered with due regard for the law!

But unfortunately the passions are ingenious and intrepid in finding new ways to take when the right way seems long and unsure. The judges had begun with the 'dislocation torture'; they now continued with torture of another kind. By order of the Senate (as we know from a letter of the Chief of Police to the Governor of Milan, Spinola, who at the time was besieging Casale) the Auditor of the Sanità, in the presence of a notary, promised Piazza his liberty on condition—as was to appear in the course of the trial—that he confessed the whole truth. In this way they managed to convey to him that of which they accused him without being compelled to discuss it; to inform him of it, not in order that his replies might help them to discover the truth, not in order to hear his opinion; but to bring to bear on him a powerful stimulus to say what they themselves wanted to hear.

The letter to which I refer was written on 28 June, that is to say when the trial, as we have seen, was already well on its way.

[9] *Tractatus varii*, 'De tortura', 44.

It begins thus: 'I think that Your Excellency should be informed of things that have come to light concerning certain criminals who have recently gone about smearing the walls and gates of this city.' And it will not be without interest, or profit, to see how those in charge of the proceedings represented the facts. 'I was commissioned,' the writer continues, 'by the Senate to set up an inquiry, as a result of which, on the evidence of certain women and of a man whose words could be trusted, a certain Guglielmo Piazza (a man of the lower class, but who holds the office of Commissioner of the Sanità) came under suspicion of having, in the early morning of Friday, 21 June, smeared the walls of a district by the Porta Ticinese, called the Vetra de' Cittadini.'

And the man whose words could be trusted, thus brought in at once to corroborate the testimony of the woman, had said that he had met with Piazza, adding 'and I greeted him and he returned my greeting'. And so Piazza 'came under suspicion'! As though the crime imputed to him was of having entered the Via della Vetra! Incidentally, the Chief of Police does not mention his own visit to the scene of the crime to verify the facts; nor was it mentioned during the rest of the trial.

'Piazza,' the letter goes on, 'was therefore immediately arrested.' But the writer says nothing of his own visit to Piazza's house, where 'nothing suspicious' had been found. 'And since his interrogation by the judges made him still more suspect' (as we have seen!) 'he was very severely tortured, but did not confess his guilt.'

If someone had informed Spinola that in fact Piazza had not been interrogated at all about the crime, Spinola would have replied: 'But I have positive information to the contrary. The Chief of Police has written to tell me, not indeed of this precisely, for that was not necessary; but he has informed me of something else which implies that and necessarily presupposes it; for he has written to say that the man, though severely tortured, did not confess the crime.' And if the objector had stuck to his point, that eminent and powerful personage might very well have retorted: 'What! Do you suppose the Chief of Police would make fun of me, to the extent of telling me, as an

important item of news, that something did not happen which could not have happened?' And yet this precisely was the case: not, of course, that the Chief of Police had tried to make fun of the Governor; but the authorities had, in fact, done a thing of such a kind that they were unable to present a truthful report of it. For the fact was, and is, that bad conscience more easily finds pretexts for acting than formulae in which to render account of what it has done.

But on the matter of impunity that letter contained another deception which Spinola could—and indeed should—have observed for himself, if he had had a mind for anything except the taking of Casale (which he never took). For the letter continues: '. . . Until by order of the Senate (indeed in execution of the last decree which Your Excellency caused to be published on this matter) Piazza, being promised impunity by the President of the Sanità, finally confessed,' etc.

In the thirty-first chapter of the foregoing work[10] mention was made of a decree in which the Tribunal of the Sanità promised a reward and impunity to whomsoever should reveal the agents responsible for the smearings found on the doors or walls of houses on the morning of 18 May; and reference was also made to a letter of the same Tribunal to the Governor on this point. This letter, after declaring that the Tribunal's decree had been published 'with the approval of the Grand Chancellor', who was deputizing for the Governor, begged the latter 'to confirm it with a fresh decree which should promise a greater reward'. And in fact the Governor did cause another one to be promulgated on 13 June, in which (so it ran) 'he promises to any person who, within thirty days, should identify the person or persons who have committed, favoured, or aided the said crime a reward of, etc. . . . and in the event of such a person being himself involved in the crime, he is also promised impunity from punishment'. Now it was as in execution of *this* decree, which so explicitly referred to something done on 18 May, that the Chief of Police said that impunity had been promised to a man accused of something done on 21 June; and

[10] *I promessi sposi*, Ch. XXXI.

he said it to the very man who had, to say the least, signed this decree. Such confidence they had, it seems, in the siege of Casale! For it would be too much to suppose that their own minds were confused to such a degree.

But why did they need to use such a subterfuge with Spinola?

It was because they needed the support of his authority to disguise an action which was irregular and unjust both by common jurisprudence and by the laws of the country. For it was a commonly accepted principle that a judge could not, on his own authority, grant impunity to an accused person; and the Constitutions of Charles V, while conceding very wide powers to the Senate, nevertheless did not concede the power 'of granting pardons for crime, remission of punishment or safe-conducts; these things being reserved to the Sovereign'. And Bossi, from whom I have already quoted, and who was among those who compiled the Constitutions, being a Senator at the time, says expressly, 'the promise of impunity pertains exclusively to the Sovereign'.[11]

But why should they have involved themselves in subterfuge when they could have had recourse to the Governor in the first place for the power to grant the impunity? For the Governor certainly had this power, as the Sovereign's representative, together with authority to delegate it; and the proof that the judges could have obtained this power from him is the fact that they did so later on with regard to another unfortunate man who was to be involved in this same inhuman trial. The Governor's reply is registered in the Acts of the trial:

> Ambrosio Spinola, etc. In conformity with the views expressed by the Senate in a letter of the 5th instant, we herewith authorize you to concede impunity to Stefano Baruello, condemned for distributing and manufacturing certain pestilent unguents which have been disseminated in this city for the destruction of the populace; if, within a period of time to be fixed by the said Senate, he shall reveal the agents of the said crime and their accomplices.

The promise to Piazza of impunity was not made in writing and officially; but informally, by the Auditor of the Sanità,

[11] Op. cit., 'De confessis per torturam,' 32. 11.

outside the trial. Naturally enough; for a formal assurance would have been obviously false, if based on the Governor's decree; and clearly a usurpation of authority if based on nothing. But why, I repeat, did the judges renounce, as it were, the possibility of giving a proper official form to so important an action?

These questions cannot be answered with certainty, but we shall see presently the advantage the judges gained from acting in this way.

In any case the irregularity of their procedure was so evident that Padilla's counsel frankly drew attention to it. Although—as he very rightly protested—he did not need, in order to disprove the charges against his client, to refer to matters in which the latter was not directly concerned; and although—wrongly and rather inconsistently—he conceded that a real crime and real criminals were involved in all this muddle of fantasy and invention; nevertheless for good measure, as people say, and with the general object of weakening the case against his client, he made various objections to the conduct of the trial as this had affected others of the accused. And in connexion with the impunity, without impugning the Senate's authority in the matter (for men are sometimes more touchy on the subject of their power than of their honesty), the advocate objected that Piazza 'was brought only before the said Lord Auditor who had no jurisdiction . . . and whose actions were therefore null and void and contrary to law'. And referring to the mention that was made in passing, later on, of that impunity, he said: 'And yet there had been nothing said or written hitherto, in the course of the trial, about any impunity, though according to law there ought to have been some such record of it before it was claimed.'

In this part of the defence a very pregnant remark was made in passing. Reviewing the actions which had preceded the promise of impunity, the advocate, without directly expressing any disapproval of the tortures inflicted on Piazza, nevertheless referred to them in these terms: 'He was tortured on implausible pretexts.' This seems to me a fact worth noting—that the thing

should have been called by its true name even at that time, even in the presence of those responsible for it, and by one who was not in the least concerned to defend the innocence of the man who suffered by it.

This promise of impunity must have been little known to the general public: Ripamonti does not mention it in his history of the plague, which gives the main facts of this trial; indeed he indirectly denies its existence. It was not in Ripamonti's nature to misrepresent things deliberately; but he is inexcusable for not having read either Padilla's defence or the digest of the trial which was printed with it; and, touching the impunity, he says that Piazza, immediately after he had been tortured and while they were unbinding him to take him back to prison, came out with a 'spontaneous and quite unexpected revelation'. This false revelation was certainly made, but not until the following day, after Piazza had spoken privately with the Auditor; and it was made to men who very much expected it. Thus if the few documents above-mentioned had not survived, if the Senate had only had to do with the public and with historians, it would have succeeded in its attempt to conceal a fact which was of fundamental importance in the trial and was the starting point of all that took place subsequently.

No one knows what took place in that meeting between Piazza and the Auditor. We are left to conjectures and probabilities. Verri writes:

> It was probably while he was actually in prison that the unhappy man was assured that if he persisted in his denials, the torture would be repeated every day; that his guilt was held to be certain, and that there was nothing that he could do now except to accuse himself and give the names of his accomplices. In this way he would save his life and escape from the daily torture prepared for him. Piazza therefore begged for impunity, and it was granted him, on condition that he made a clean breast of the facts.[12]

And yet it does not seem at all likely that Piazza himself asked for impunity; as we shall see as we follow the rest of the trial, he never took a step on his own initiative; he had to be dragged

[12] Op. cit., c. iv.

forward all the time; and in order to make him take that first step, and such a strange and horrible one, of calumniating himself and others, it is much more likely that he was offered the impunity by the Auditor. Moreover, the judges would surely not have omitted, when they spoke to him of it later, to mention so important a circumstance and one which gave so much more weight to his confession; nor would the Chief of Police have overlooked it in his letter to Spinola.

But who can imagine the struggle that went on in Piazza, with the memory of the torture so fresh in his mind, making him feel at the same time a terror of suffering again and a horror of causing others to suffer; having been offered the chance of escaping a ghastly death only at the cost of bringing it upon some other innocent person! For he could not have believed that they were going to let go one prey without trying to catch another, that they were resigned to doing without any condemnation at all. He yielded; he seized on the chance they offered, however horrible, in its conditions, and however doubtful it must have seemed; he accepted, deliberately, the loathsome and difficult task of finding another victim to take his place. But how find such a victim? Where should he begin? How choose with no one to choose from? In his own case, there had been a real fact to serve as the occasion and pretext for an accusation. He had, after all, gone into the Via della Vetra, he had walked along it touching the wall; and though the woman who saw him was warped in mind, she had at any rate seen something. We shall see that it was another equally innocent and equally trivial fact which suggested both the person he would accuse and the story he would invent.

There was a barber called Giangiacomo Mora who compounded and put out for sale an ointment as medicine against the plague—one of a thousand such things which had gained credit with the populace, as was only to be expected when an evil of which no one knew the remedy was working such havoc and in an age when medicine had as yet so little learned how not to dogmatize and had as yet taught people so little what not to believe. Now a few days before his arrest, Piazza had asked

this barber for some of his ointment and the latter had promised to get some ready for him; and then, meeting Piazza on the Carrobio on the very morning of the day after the arrest, he had told him that the jar was ready and asked him to come and take it. But a story about ointment, about agreements between people, about the Via della Vetra, was just what the judges wanted from Piazza; hence these circumstances, all so fresh in his mind, supplied him with the materials to compose such a story—if you can call it composing to take a number of real circumstances and tack on an invention inconsistent with them.

On the day following, 26 June, Piazza was brought before the court of inquiry and ordered by the Auditor 'to declare in the presence of the notary Balbiano, and in conformity with the confession he has made extra-judicially to me, whether he knows who is responsible for compounding the unguents with which the gates and walls of the houses of this city have so many times been smeared'. But the poor wretch, who was lying against the grain, tried to move as little as possible away from the truth; he answered: 'It was the barber who gave me the ointment.' This is a literal translation of his words as recorded, which Ripamonti, as we have seen, places in the wrong context: *dedit unguenta mihi tonsor*. They told him 'to name the said barber'; and the latter's self-styled accomplice and instrument in crime replied: 'I think the name is Giovanni Giacomo, but his family [surname] I don't know.' He only knew for certain where the man's house, or rather shop, was; as was to appear in a later interrogation.

Piazza was then asked whether 'from the barber, thus identified, he has received little or much of the ointment'. He replied: 'He gave me as much of it as could be contained in the inkstand on that table.' If he had received from Mora the little jar of the stuff he had ordered, he would have described it; but, finding his memory empty, he grasped at an object he could actually see, as being at least something real. Their next question was 'whether this barber was a friend of his', and he, without noticing that what he really did remember was quite inconsistent

with the story he was making up, answered: 'He is a friend, my Lord, yes indeed, an old friend, my Lord'; which simply meant that they knew one another enough to say 'good morning', if so much.

Without comment, the cross-examiners went on to ask him in what circumstances 'the barber had given him the unguent'. Piazza replied: 'As I was going along, he called me and said, "I've something for you." So I said, "What?" And he said, "a sort of ointment". And I said, "All right, I will come and get it from you later." And so, two or three days later, he gave it me.' In this account what had actually occurred was altered enough in its details to fit in with Piazza's story; but a good deal survived the process; and some of the words quoted probably had been spoken when the two men met. Phrases spoken in consequence of a previous agreement about a safeguard against disease were now reported as having been used in order there and then to concoct a plan—as crazy, to say the least, as it would have been wicked—to spread poison in the city.

The judges, nevertheless, proceeded with questions on the place, the date, and the time of day of the proposal, and the acceptance. Then, as though satisfied with Piazza's replies on these points, they asked, 'And what did he say to you when he actually gave you the ointment?' 'He said,' answered Piazza, '"Take this jar and smear the walls of the streets here behind us; and then come to me and I'll give you a lot of money."' At this point Verri comments with some impatience: 'But what prevented the barber from safely doing the smearing himself during the night?' And the next reply brings out still more plainly the implausibility noted by this comment. Asked, 'Did the barber tell the witness precisely where he was to smear the stuff?' Piazza answered, 'He told me to do it in the Vedra de' Cittadini, and that I was to start at the street corner, which I did.'

'So the barber didn't even smear his own street-corner!' notes Verri; and to be sure *his* intelligence was hardly required for that observation; whereas either a blindness caused by passion was needed for it not to be made, or downright malice, due to

the same cause if, as seems more likely, the same idea occurred to the judges.

It cost the unhappy Piazza such an effort to invent his story, it had to be forced out of him by so many questions, that one is left wondering whether that promised bribe was a mere product of his imagination as it cast about for some likely reason for having agreed to do as he was doing, or whether it had really been suggested to him in that secret interview with the Auditor. The same doubt arises when we find his story stumbling, indirectly, against another difficulty—namely how on earth he could have handled so deadly an ointment without taking any harm from it himself. On the judges asking him, 'Whether the barber told him why he was having the said doors and walls smeared', Piazza replied, 'He didn't say anything, but I think the ointment was a poison harmful to the body, because the next morning he gave me a glass of water to drink, saying that it would be a safeguard.'

To all these replies, and to others which it would be tedious to repeat, the judges found nothing to object, or rather they expressed no objection. Regarding one point only they thought fit to require an explanation: why had the witness not confessed all this before? Answer: 'I don't know—I can't think of any reason except perhaps the water which he gave me to drink; for Your Excellencies know that, in spite of all the tortures, I couldn't say a thing.' But this time they were not so easily satisfied; they repeated the question: 'Why had he not confessed the truth sooner, especially in view of the tortures he had undergone both on Saturday and yesterday?'

The truth!

He replied: 'I didn't admit it because I couldn't, and if I had stayed hanging on that rope a hundred years I still couldn't have said anything; I just couldn't speak: whenever I was asked about anything to do with this business it all went out of my head and I couldn't answer.' This said, the judges concluded the interrogation and sent the unfortunate Piazza back to prison.

Yet is it enough merely to call him unfortunate? This is a question one's conscience shies away from and would rather

declare itself incompetent to answer: how cruel, how arrogant, how pharisaically presumptuous it seems, at first, to pass judgement on a man trapped and tortured as Piazza was! But the question cannot be avoided, and there is only one possible answer: he was also guilty. The sufferings and fears of an innocent man are great things, powerful things, but they do not alter the moral law; they cannot make calumny to be no longer wrong. And the very pity that makes us wish we could find excuses for the sufferer turns us against the calumniator. Another innocent man has been named; we foresee another's sufferings and fears, and perhaps another's similar sins.

And the men who did the trapping and the torturing—shall we excuse them on the plea that they sincerely believed the tale about the poison, and that to torture was normal procedure at that time? But we too believe that men may be killed with poison; but what should we say of a judge who based the justice of a death-sentence for poisoning on this persuasion? The death-penalty is still inflicted; but what should we say to a man who thereby justified every death-sentence? No, the fact is that as far precisely as Guglielmo Piazza was concerned there might as well have not been any practice of torture; it was his judges who deliberately brought it into this particular case, who in a sense invented it for this occasion. Had he deceived them, the fault would still have been theirs, for he was acting under pressure from them; but we have seen that he did not deceive them. And even supposing they were deceived by his statements in the final interrogation—that they believed the story he told, with all the details that we have heard—what was it that started Piazza speaking in this way? How did they obtain his statement? With a device, the illegality of which they had no business to be deceived about, and in fact were not deceived about, since they did their best to conceal it and disguise it.

And if *per impossibile* all that took place subsequently had been nothing but an accidental convergence of factors tending to confirm them in their deception, they would still have been to blame for having prepared the ground for such a deception in the first place. But we shall see, on the contrary, that the whole

affair went forward as the effect of, and controlled by, their intention to maintain that 'deception' to the bitter end; to do which they were prepared not only to dodge the law but also to shut their eyes to evidence, and not only to harden their hearts against pity but also play fast and loose with justice.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE Auditor hastened to Mora's house with a squad of police. They found him in his shop—this second criminal, untroubled by any thought of flight or concealment, though his accomplice had now been four days in prison. With Mora was his son. They were both arrested by order of the Auditor.

When Verri examined the parish registers of San Lorenzo, he found that the unlucky barber may also have had three daughters, one aged fourteen, one twelve, and one just six. I find it moving that a man like Verri, rich, celebrated, well-born, invested with public authority, should have gone to such trouble to unearth the records of people who were poor, lowly, forgotten, and what is more, technically criminals; that he should have thus gone seeking fresh objects for a wise and generous compassion at a time when his contemporaries still blindly and obstinately repeated the foolish denunciations of an earlier generation. It is, to be sure, unreasonable to pit compassion against justice. Justice must sometimes punish in spite of pity; it cannot condone crime out of compassion for the innocent who may suffer when guilty men are punished. Yet compassion too is a kind of justice, when stirred by violence and bad faith. That first sudden dismay of a wife and a mother, the terror that must have gripped the hearts of those children, so utterly unprepared for what occurred—their grief and horror at seeing a father and a brother suddenly seized and bound and insulted—if the men who caused this had had nothing worse on their consciences it

alone had been a grievous thing to answer for. For it exceeded anything that justice required or even that the law allowed.

Because, of course, to arrest a man, you had to have some evidence against him, and against Mora there was none—neither ill-repute, nor attempted flight, nor complaint of an offended party, nor accusation lodged by anyone worthy of belief, nor testimony of any witness; nothing but the statement of a presumed accomplice; and before a judge could act on such a statement many conditions had to be fulfilled. We shall see that more than one essential condition was in fact lacking, and it would be easy to show the same of many others; but there is no need for this, because, even had every condition been scrupulously observed, there was one circumstance in this case which rendered the accusation absolutely invalid from the start —namely, that it was made in virtue of a promise of impunity. 'Whatever is testified,' says Farinacci, 'as a result of a hope of exemption from punishment (whether such exemption be conceded by the law or promised by the judge) ought not to be received as evidence against the persons named in the testimony.'[1] And Bossi writes:

> That testimony is defective which a witness makes in consequence of a promise of impunity . . . considering that a witness ought to speak disinterestedly and not with a view to gaining some advantage. . . . And this holds even in cases when, for other reasons, the rule which disallows the evidence of an accomplice is dispensed. . . . The witness who testifies because of a promise of impunity is called 'corrupt' and deserves no credence.[2]

This was a principle universally admitted.

As the police were about to search his house and shop Mora said to the Auditor: 'Oh, Your Excellency, I know you have come for that ointment of mine. Your Excellency can see it there—a little jar of it that I got ready to give to the Commissioner of Police, but he hasn't come for it. I've done nothing wrong. You don't need to keep me bound.' The poor fellow

[1] Op. cit., Q. xliii, 192.
[2] *Tract. varii*, 'De oppositionibus contra testes', 21.

thought that it was for making and distributing the specific without a licence that they were arresting him.

They turned everything upside down, examining big jars, little jars, flasks, casks, every sort of container (at that time barbers went in for rudimentary surgery, whence it was only a step to dabbling in medicine and pharmacy). They found two things that roused their suspicion; and, with apologies to the reader, I must speak of them, because it was just this suspicion shown by the police in the course of their examination of his house which led to poor Mora's finding something to accuse himself of when he later came to be tortured. Besides, the whole affair offers greater objects for our disgust.

In time of plague it was natural that a man who had to have dealings with many people, and particularly with the sick, should live apart from his own family as much as possible (an observation which Padilla's advocate was to make, as we shall see, when pointing out to the prosecution the lack of material evidence of crime in this case). Besides, the plague itself had lowered the standard of cleanliness—not in any case a high one then—in that afflicted population. So it is hardly surprising that in a small room behind the shop the police should have found, as the records say, 'two pots full of human excrement'. But one policeman was surprised by this find and remarked (since anyone was free to speak against 'the smearers') that 'the privy was upstairs'; to which Mora answered, 'I sleep down here and don't go upstairs.'

The second thing was that in a little yard they found 'an oven and in it, behind a low wall, a brass cooking-pot containing dirty water and at the bottom some sticky yellowish-white stuff which, on being thrown against a wall, stuck to it'. Mora said: 'It is *smoglio*' (i.e., lye), and the records note that he said this very emphatically, an observation which shows the sinister importance the police attached to this discovery. But how did they come to take such risks in handling so mysteriously potent a poison? Their, fear, no doubt, was overcome by the fury which was yet one of its causes.

They found also, among Mora's papers, a recipe which the

Auditor handed to him, asking him to explain it. Mora tore it up because in the confusion he took it for the recipe of his specific against the plague. The scraps were picked up at once, and we shall see later how this paltry incident was used against him.

The report of the trial does not say how many people were arrested along with Mora. Ripamonti says that the whole household was taken away, including those who worked in the shop—wife and children and whatever other relatives happened to be there, and the youths and boys in Mora's employment.

On leaving his house (to which he never returned and which was destined to be razed to the ground to make room for the Column of Infamy) Mora said: 'I haven't done anything wrong. If anything has been wrong, I am ready to be punished for it; but since I made that ointment I've done nothing else. If that was a crime, I ask for mercy.'

He was interrogated that same day, chiefly concerning the lye found in his house and concerning his relations with the Commissioner of Police. His answer on the first point was: 'My Lord, I know nothing about it. The women must have been responsible for it; ask them, they will tell you. As for me, I had no more idea that it was there than that I should be taken to prison today.' With regard to the Commissioner, Mora told of the jar of unguent which he had promised to let this man have, specifying its ingredients. He denied having had anything else to do with the Commissioner, except that about a year before the latter had come to his house for some professional service or other.

Immediately after Mora they had his son up for questioning, and it was then that this poor lad repeated the stupid story about the little pot and the pen which I mentioned at the beginning. For the rest, they got nothing conclusive out of him. Verri, in a note, observes that they ought to have asked the barber's son about the lye, so as to find out how long it had been in the cooking-pot, and how it had been made, and why. 'But,' he adds, 'they feared to find Mora not guilty.' This goes to the root of the whole affair.

However, they did question Mora's wife on this point. The

gist of her replies was that she had done the household washing ten or twelve days previously; that after every such washing she put aside some lye for certain surgical purposes, which was how the police came to find it; but that this time she had not in fact found any use for the stuff. The lye itself they then had examined by two washerwomen and three doctors. The women said it was lye but that it had been altered in some way; the doctors said it was not lye at all. The reason for both replies was the same: the stuff stuck to the pot and only came off in strings. 'In a barber's shop,' comments Verri, 'where linen soiled by wounds and plasterings has been washed, what more natural than to find a sticky, oily, yellowish sediment, especially in the summer?'[3]

But to conclude, all this searching of Mora's house brought no discovery to light; its only results were negative. And Padilla's counsel was to draw the conclusion quite correctly: 'From my reading of the case for the prosecution,' he was to say, 'I cannot see that it has established circumstantial evidence of crime such as a sentence of guilt of necessity requires.' And he went on to observe that such evidence was the more necessary, in this case, in that the effect which was being ascribed to criminal activity, i.e., the death of so many people, had its proper natural causes. 'How necessary,' he exclaimed, 'to turn back from such vague ungrounded opinions to the certainties of experience. Men have studied the unfavourable influences of the constellations; the mathematicians have made their prognostications; from which it had become perfectly clear already that the year 1630 would bring plague—the plague which in any case has desolated and destroyed so many fine cities of Lombardy, not to speak of other parts of Italy, without any thought or fear of unguents ever crossing anyone's mind.' Here even error, we see, comes to the aid of truth, although truth needed no such assistance. But one is sorry to hear this advocate, after this and other equally cogent observations in disproof of the 'crime', and after ascribing to the force of torture the deposition which had accused his client, it is sad to hear him

[3] Op. cit., c. iv.

come out on another occasion with the following strange remark: 'It must be admitted that sheer wickedness caused the said persons and their accomplices to attempt so heinous a crime against the fatherland; for, as the barber himself confessed, their motive was to enrich themselves by robbery.'

In the letter in which the Chief of Police informed the Governor of these events, we read: 'The barber has been arrested, his house having been found to contain certain compounds which competent judges consider very suspect.' Suspect! A word that a judge may begin with, but never willingly ends with, without first trying every means in his power to change suspicion into certainty. And if there really was anyone who did not know or could not guess what means were available even in those days for establishing the truth, means which certainly could have been adopted had anyone genuinely desired to know exactly how poisonous the dirt found in Mora's house was—well, the President of the Court was there to give such information. In fact, in the letter already referred to, in which the Tribunal of the Sanità told the Governor about the great fouling of walls on 18 May, mention had been made of an experiment with dogs, in order to 'ascertain whether the smearings were poisonous or not'. But when that letter was written the Tribunal had not yet got a man in their clutches on whom to try the experiment of torture, and against whom the mob was yelling *'Tolle!'*

However, before putting Mora to this test, they desired clearer and more precise information (and the reader will agree they needed it) from the Commissioner of the Sanità. So they had him brought before them and asked him whether what he had deposed on oath was true and whether he had since remembered anything else. But Piazza only confirmed his previous statement and found nothing to add to it now. Then they said: 'It seems highly implausible that nothing passed between you and the barber other than what you stated in your deposition. For you were concerned with a matter of the gravest consequence such as one does not normally entrust to another's execution in the off-hand way described in your statement.'

A remark much to the point; but made too late. Why had they not made it *à propos* of Piazza's first deposition which did not differ from this one? Why did they call that first deposition 'the truth'? Was their sense of what was plausible so dull and slow that it took them a whole day to wake up to an implausibility? *They* dull and slow? On the contrary! Their sense of the implausible was wonderfully, even excessively, delicate. Had they not immediately found it implausible when Piazza denied having heard of the fouling of the walls in Via della Vetra? When he said he did not know the names of those parish deputies? What made them so hard to please in one case, so quick to decide in the other?

They well knew the reason; and He who sees all things knew it too. And there is something that even we can discern—that they found an implausibility when this served them as a pretext for torturing Piazza, and did not find one when it would have proved too obvious an impediment to the arrest of Mora.

We have, to be sure, already seen that since Piazza's deposition was basically invalid, the judges had no right to make any use of it against Mora. But because they were in any case resolved to use it, they had no choice but to uphold it. If, when Piazza first made his statement they had declared it 'highly implausible'; and if Piazza had not succeeded in getting round this difficulty by putting out a more plausible story, and this without contradicting the first one (an unlikely event); then the judges would have found themselves faced with the alternatives of either leaving Mora alone or of imprisoning him after having themselves protested, as it were, in advance against such an action.

The remark about implausibility was followed by a terrible admonition: 'If the witness is determined not to speak the whole truth, as he promised to do, then let him take warning that the promised impunity will not avail him—in so far, that is, as his declaration as to what took place between him and the barber be found to come short of the entire truth; whereas on the contrary, if he speaks the truth, the said impunity will avail him.'

Here, by the way—to recall a point already alluded to—it

becomes clear what an advantage it was to the judges not to have had recourse to the Governor for the concession of this impunity. Had he conceded it, on his sovereign authority and with all the due formalities, there could have been no question of withdrawing it so casually now. But what a mere Auditor said, an Auditor could unsay.

We may also note here that it was not until 5 September that an impunity was requested, from the Governor, for Baruello; that is to say, after the punishment inflicted on Piazza, Mora, and a few others. By that time one could take the risk of letting someone escape; the animals having been fed, their bellowings became naturally less impatient, less imperious.

On receiving that warning, Piazza—who was resolved to stick to the wretched course he had chosen—had fairly to cudgel his brains for all they were worth; but the only result was a repetition of his original story. 'I will tell Your Excellency. Two days before the barber gave me the ointment, he was standing in the street leading to Porta Ticinese with three other men, and seeing me pass by, he said to me: "Commissioner, I have some ointment for you." I said: "Do you want to give it to me now?" He answered, "No." And just then he did not tell me about the effects of the ointment. But when he gave it to me later he said that it was for smearing on the walls so as to make people die. And I didn't ask him whether he had already tried it out.' To be sure, in the original story Piazza did not say: 'He said it was . . . to make people die', but rather: 'he didn't say anything, but I think the ointment was a poison'. However, the judges let this contradiction pass and asked him, 'Who were the men with the barber and how were they dressed?' Piazza did not know who they were; he only suspected that they were friends of Mora. As for their dress, he could not remember. He only insisted that what he had deposed against Mora was the truth, and on being asked whether he was prepared to maintain this to Mora's face, he answered 'yes'. They then put him to the torture again in order to 'cleanse him from disrepute' and 'make it possible for him to bear witness' against the unlucky barber.

The use of torture is, thank God, so much a thing of the past

that these phrases need to be explained. Roman law had laid it down that 'the testimony of gladiators and suchlike was invalid, unless corroborated by torture',[4] and later jurisprudence had specified the persons to whom this rule applied, naming them 'disreputable'. And to this class belonged everyone convicted of crime, whether by his own confession or by a process of proof. But how did torture 'cleanse' from such disrepute? The jurists reasoned as follows. An accomplice to a crime is not as such an acceptable witness. But if he persist in an assertion that is very much against his own actual and tangible self-interest, then one may admit that he does so as constrained by the force of truth. So then if, after a man convicted of some crime has become the accuser of someone else, the former is told that he must either withdraw his accusation or submit to torture; and if he persist in the accusation, and persist even when the threat is carried out and he actually *is* tortured; then in that case, they said, his testimony becomes credible. Torture has 'cleansed his disrepute'—giving his testimony the authority which it could not get from his personal character.

But then why had they not made Piazza confirm under torture his first deposition? Was it so as not to imperil this deposition—so flimsy in itself but so necessary for the arrest of Mora? The omission, in any case, lent an added illegality to that arrest; for while it was admitted that the accusation of a 'disreputable' person, not corroborated by torture, might, like any other weak evidence, be of some use in the process of collecting information, it was not admitted as a ground for taking action against the one who was accused. Claro states this as, without exception, the practice of the courts in Milan: 'For an accomplice to be accepted as a witness, it is necessary that he first be tortured; for as such he is in disrepute on account of his crime. This is our practice: *et ita apud nos servatur.*'[5]

Was it then legally correct to torture Piazza, at least this last time? By no means; even in law it was unjust, for their purpose in torturing him was to confer validity on an accusation which, being the effect of a promise of impunity, could never in fact

[4] *Digest*, XXII, tit. 5, 'De testibus'.

[5] Op. cit., Q. xxi, 13.

become valid. Why did they not heed their own Bossi's warning on this point? 'Since the harm,' he writes, 'done by torture cannot be remedied, care must be taken not to inflict it to no purpose, i.e. when no further presumption or evidence of crime has been brought against a man.'[6]

Then whatever they did, they broke the law—torturing or not torturing. Certainly: and why should we be surprised? If one takes a wrong turning one may well come to a choice between two roads that are both wrong.

For the rest, I need hardly tell the reader that the torture used on Piazza to make him withdraw an accusation did not have to be so efficient as that used on him to force him to accuse himself. And in fact they had no howls or groans to record this time; he confirmed his testimony quite calmly.

Then they asked him, and twice over, why he had not made it when they first interrogated him: clearly, they could not get the suspicion out of their minds (and a sting of remorse from their hearts) that perhaps his absurd story had been prompted by their promise of impunity. He answered: 'It was because of the water that I told you I drank.' They would no doubt have preferred a better reason, but they had to put up with this one. They had neglected—indeed shunned and shut out—every means that might have helped them to discover the truth; they had made their choice between the two opposite conclusions to which the inquiry might have led, and had then used one means after another to obtain, at any cost, the conclusion they had chosen: had they now any right to find in this the joy which the sight of a truth that has been sincerely sought for can give? To put out the light is an excellent way to avoid seeing what one does not want to see, but not to see what one does want to see.

When the rope was let down and while they were untying him, the Commissioner said: 'My Lord, please wait until tomorrow, when I will tell you whatever else I can remember about the barber and about other people too.' And then, as they were taking him back to prison, he stopped and said: 'Wait, I have something to say now'; and proceeded to name, as friends

[6] Op. cit., 'De indiciis . . . ante torturam', 152.

to Mora and as shady characters, the aforenamed Baruello and two *foresari,*[7] Girolamo Migliavacca and his son Gaspare.

In this way the wretched man tried to make names a substitute for the evidence that he knew was lacking. But could his interrogators have possibly failed to see that with this Piazza only gave further proof of not being able to answer their questions? It was they who had asked him to state circumstances that might corroborate his account of what had happened; and presumably he who calls for corroboration sees the need of it. But with these vague new accusations Piazza was as good as saying: 'You tell me to show you quite clearly the existence of a fact. This I can't do because there was no fact. But after all, what you really want is to get hold of people you can condemn. Very well then, here are some—and now it is up to you to get what you require from them. You are sure to succeed with at least one of them; after all you did so with me.'

I shall not mention again the three men named by Piazza—nor others named subsequently, on no better grounds, and condemned with equal assurance—except so far as this may be required for telling the story of Piazza and Mora (who, being the first to fall into the hands of the police, were always regarded as the principal criminals) or so far as they offer an occasion for some particular comment on the affair. I omit also, here as heretofore, various minor happenings, and pass straight to the second examination of Mora; which took place on the same day.

In the course of various question about his unguent-specific, about the lye, and about some lizards he had had caught by the shop-boys in order to concoct a medicine used at that time (questions which he answered like a man who has nothing to hide and no need to invent) they produced the pieces of the paper that was torn up by Mora when the police visited his home. He said: 'I see it is the paper I tore up without thinking what I was doing, and if you will put the pieces together so that the writing can be read, I will also be able to remember who gave it to me.'

[7] Grinders of scissors for cutting gold thread. The fact that there was a distinct profession of this kind shows that the industry which it subserved was still flourishing in Milan.

They then asked him: 'How is it that if (as you said in the preceding interrogation) you are not a particular friend of Commissioner Piazza, he so readily had recourse to you for the jar of preservative against the plague, and you so freely and readily agreed to let him have it, and asked him to come and fetch it?'

Notice the appeal, once again, to the *stricter* standard of plausibility. When, the first time, Piazza asserted that his 'good old friend' the barber had offered him, no less 'freely and readily', stuff intended to spread death through the city, the judges accepted the story at once; but not now, on hearing that the stuff was intended as a safeguard. And yet surely one should be less hesitant in looking for the accomplice without whom some minor illegality, and one involving actions in themselves innocent, could not have been committed, than in seeking a superfluous 'accomplice' to a crime both abominable in itself and extremely dangerous to its perpetrators. Nor is this a discovery made in these last two hundred years. The judges' topsyturvy reasoning was not the reasoning of 'seventeenth-century man', but simply of frightened and furious men. As for Mora's answer, it was: 'I did it for the money.'

They asked him next whether he knew the other men named by Piazza; to which he replied that he did, but they were no friends of his, being 'persons better left alone'. Then they asked: Did he know who had fouled the whole city with those smearings? Answer: No, he did not. Did he know, then, who had provided the Commissioner with the unguent to be smeared? No, again he did not. And then their final question: does he know whether anyone offered money to the said Commissioner to induce him to smear the walls of Via Vedra de' Cittadini, and then gave him a glass jar of unguent to be used for the purpose? To which Mora replied, in a low voice and with his head bowed *(flectens caput et submissa voce):* 'I know nothing about it.'

It was perhaps only now that he began to see to what a strange and horrible conclusion all the twists and turns of these questions might be leading him. If so, he must have guessed the truth from the way they questioned him; but who can tell

what exactly it was that opened his eyes? But certainly, his judges, in the degree that they were still, willy-nilly, unsure of having discovered what they were seeking, must have been led to hint that now at last they *were* sure—that now they were forearmed against foreseen denials. But they could not see, of course, nor record the faces and gestures that he saw.

They put the direct question to him: 'Did you seek out Guglielmo Piazza, Commissioner of the Sanità, in order to induce him to smear the walls at the corner of the Via Vedra de' Cittadini, and to this end give him a small glass jar containing unguent for that purpose; promising him a sum of money in payment?'

His reply was more of a cry than an answer. 'My Lord, no! *Maidè*,[8] no! No, no, forever, for eternity! Would *I* do such things?' Words which could be spoken either by a guilty man or an innocent man, but not in the same way by both. But they answered: 'What then will you say when this truth is maintained to your face by Guglielmo Piazza?'

This truth once again! Their entire knowledge of the matter was based on the statement of a presumed accomplice; to whom they themselves, that very day, had replied that the story, as he told it, was 'most implausible'; and who had since then failed to add to it a single grain of plausibility, unless self-contradiction be such. And now to Mora they coolly say, 'this truth'! Was this due to the grossness of the times? Or to a barbarous legal system? Or to ignorance? Or superstition? Or was it one of those occasions when iniquity gives the lie to itself?

Mora answered: 'If he maintains this to my face, I will tell him he is a scoundrel, and that he cannot say this, because we have never spoken of any such thing, so help me God!'

They summoned Piazza and, in Mora's presence, asked him if this and that and the other were true; one thing after the other, his entire deposition. He answered, 'Yes, my Lord, it is true.' Poor Mora cried, 'God in heaven, this can never be shown to be true!' The Commissioner: 'I have come to this by helping you.' Mora: 'It can never be shown; you cannot prove that you

[8] An old Milanese expression meaning originally 'my God'.

have ever been in my house.' Piazza: 'I wish I never had, but I have been there; and now I've come to this because of you.' Mora: 'You will never prove that you've been to my house.' Then they were taken away, each to his own prison.

In the letter—mentioned more than once above—of the Chief of Police to the Governor, this encounter was described as follows: 'Piazza vigorously maintained to his [Mora's] face that he really had received from Mora an unguent of this kind, giving the circumstances of time and place.' Spinola then must have been led to believe that Piazza had specified these circumstances, and, so doing, had been contradicted by Mora on each of them. As for that 'vigorously maintained', all it boiled down to in fact was, 'Yes, my Lord, it is true.'

The letter ended with these words: 'Further inquiries are on foot to discover other accomplices and ringleaders. Meanwhile, I thought it well to inform Your Excellency of what is being done in the matter. Humbly kissing Your Excellency's hands, I wish Your Excellency every success in your present undertakings.' There were probably other letters which have not survived. As to the Governor's undertakings, the well-wishing went for nothing: not receiving reinforcements, Spinola lost all hope of taking Casale, fell sick (partly out of chagrin) and died on the 25th of the same month; having failed in the end to live up to his illustrious title, acquired in Flanders, of 'the taker of cities'; and exclaiming (in Spanish), 'They have dishonoured me.' What 'they' had done was, in fact, worse—placed him in a position involving many grave responsibilities, only one of which he appears to have taken seriously; this being probably also the only one they had in mind when appointing him.

The day after his confrontation with Mora, the Commissioner asked to be heard again. Brought before the court, he said: 'The barber has denied that I was ever in his house; so I beg your Lordships to interrogate Baldassar Litta, who lives in Antonio's house in the district of San Bernadino, and Stefano Buzzio, a dyer who lives opposite Sant' Agostino, near Sant' Ambrogio. These men know that I have been in the barber's house and shop.'

Was Piazza acting on his own in saying this? Or on a suggestion from the judges? If the former, it was an odd thing to do, as the event will show; on the other hand the judges would have had a very strong motive for urging him to this step. They wanted a pretext for having Mora tortured; and among the factors which, in the opinion of many learned men, could give to an accusation made by an accomplice the force which it otherwise lacked, and so render it sufficient grounds for torturing the person accused, was a relation of friendship between the latter and his accuser. But not any kind of friendship or acquaintance; for in that case, as Farinacci observes, 'any accusation by an accomplice could count as sufficient evidence, it being hardly likely that an accuser be wholly unacquainted with the man he accuses. What must be shown is that the two men have been in close and frequent contact, such as to make it plausible that the crime in question was planned by them together'.[9] And this in fact was why the judges had begun by asking Piazza whether the barber were a friend of his. And the reader will remember the answer they received: 'He is a friend . . . indeed, an old friend.' But more than this bare assertion they could not wring from him, even with threats; so that what they had sought for as a means to the end they were pursuing had become an obstacle in their path. True, it was never, and could never become, a legally valid means; for no friendship, however intimate and however well certified as a fact, could have given validity to an accusation already nullified by the promise of impunity. But this difficulty, like many others not actually raised in the course of the trial, they simply ignored; whereas, having explicitly made an issue of the friendship, or lack of it, between Piazza and Mora, they found themselves now compelled to settle this question once and for all. Thus it is that the records of the trial contain statements by jailers, policemen, and persons who were already in prison for other crimes, statements made in consequence of their being dragged into the affair for the sole purpose of 'getting them to say something' on this point. It is then very probable indeed that the judges had used some

[9] Op. cit., Q. xliii, 172–4.

such person to tell the Commissioner that his safety might depend on his supplying proofs of his friendship with Mora; and that the poor wretch, to avoid admitting that he had none, had had recourse to a stratagem which would otherwise never have occurred to him. For the actual testimony of the two witnesses cited by him showed how little he could have counted on them: Baldassare Litta, being asked whether 'he had ever seen Piazza in Mora's house or shop', answered, 'No, my Lord'; and Stefano Buzzi, on being asked 'whether Piazza and the barber were friends', answered, 'Perhaps they were; perhaps they exchanged greetings when they met; but I really wouldn't know, my Lord.' And when asked again, 'if he knew whether Piazza had ever been in Mora's house or shop', he said, 'I couldn't say, my Lord.'

After this they called another witness to verify a statement in Piazza's deposition, that a certain Matteo Volpi had been present when the barber had said to him, 'I have something for you.' Questioned on this, Volpi not only replied that he knew nothing about it, but, when his questioners persisted, answered with spirit, 'I am ready to swear that I have never seen them speaking together.'

The next day, 7 June, Mora was examined again; and you would never guess how this interrogation began.

'Please tell us why, at your last interrogation when you were brought face to face with Guglielmo Piazza, Commissioner of the Sanità, you said that you scarcely knew him and that he had never been in your house, although to your face he maintained the contrary; and again, despite the fact that in your first interrogation you showed that you knew him very well, as is also clear from the formal testimony of other witnesses, besides the fact that it clearly appears from your eagerness in offering him and preparing for him (as you have already admitted) a jar of your preservative.' Mora replied: 'It is true that the Commissioner often passes by my shop; but he is not well known to my household nor to me.' They answered: 'That is contradicted, not only by what you said in the first interrogation, but by the testimony of other witnesses....'

Any comment would be superfluous.

However, they dared not torture Mora simply because of Piazza's deposition. So what then? Why, they went back to the pretext of 'implausibilities'; and, believe it or not, one of these was his having denied that Piazza was his friend and a frequent visitor at his house, while at the same time stating that he had promised Piazza some of the preservative! The other was that he had not sufficiently explained why he had torn up that paper. For Mora persisted in saying that he had done this inadvertently and under the impression that the paper could be of no interest to the police. Perhaps, poor fellow, he feared to make things worse for himself if he admitted to having torn it so as to destroy evidence of an illegality on his part; or perhaps he really could not explain to himself, here and now, what he had done in those first moments of confusion and panic. In any case, those bits of paper were now in the hands of his judges; and if they suspected that the writing on them contained evidence of crime, they had only to put the pieces together and read it, as Mora himself had suggested in the first place. And is it credible that they had not, in fact, already done so?

They ordered Mora, then, with threats of torture, to tell them the truth on the above two points. He replied: 'I have already told you about the paper. As for the Commissioner, he can say what he likes but what he told you is a damned lie, because I gave him nothing.'

He thought—and how could he not have thought?—that this was the truth they finally wanted from him. But of course not! They replied: 'Do not bother us with that point; it is not about that that we are asking you. All that we want to know here and now is why you tore up the piece of paper and why you have denied and still deny that the Commissioner has been to your shop, and so would almost have us believe that you do not know him.'

It would, I think, be hard to find another example of so shamelessly untruthful a respect for legal formalities. Since it was too obvious that they had no right to have Mora tortured on account of the main—indeed the only—charge that had been

brought against him, they wanted to make it appear that the torture would be inflicted on other grounds.

But wickedness is like a cloak that doesn't fit: pull it down to cover one side of you, it will leave the other bare. For they were now left with only two pretexts for proceeding to physical violence, both entirely unjust: one which they themselves in effect declared to be such, in preferring not to make out what was written on the paper; the other shown to be so, and even more flagrantly, by the testimonies with which they had tried to give it the force of legal proof. And, as though this were not enough, there is the further point that, even if Piazza's second statement had been fully confirmed by those testimonies, and even had there not been the obstacle of the impunity, Piazza's deposition had no validity at all as legal evidence: 'If,' writes Farinacci, 'the depositions of an accomplice prove inconsistent and self-contradictory, then, as the statements of a perjuror, they cannot render the person whom he accuses liable to torture . . . or even to interrogation . . . and this is a principle commonly accepted, one can say, by all writers on the law.'

But Mora *was* put to the torture.

He was not so robust, poor man, as his calumniator. For a time, however, the agony only wrung pitiful cries from him and protestations that he had said the truth: 'Oh my God, I don't know the man, we have never been friends, and that's why I can't say . . . and that's why it's a lie he tells that he has often visited my house or been in my shop. Oh God! Mercy, my Lord, mercy! That paper I tore up thinking it was the recipe for my preservative . . . because all I wanted was the money.'

'That is not enough,' they said. He begged to be let down, saying that he would tell the truth. Let down, he said: 'The truth is that I do not know the Commissioner well.' The torture was resumed, with greater severity. To their pitiless questioning he then replied, 'My Lords, tell me what you want me to say, and I will say it'; the same reply that Philotas gave to the man who was torturing him at the command of Alexander the Great

('who himself was behind a curtain listening'[10]): *dic quid me velis dicere;* the same reply of who knows how many other poor wretches.

At last the pain overcame all aversion to self-calumny and all fear of the death-sentence; he said: 'I gave the Commissioner a jar of filth, of excrement, so that he should smear the walls with it. Your Lordships, let me down; I will tell the truth.'

So they had succeeded in making Mora confirm the policeman's suspicions just as they had succeeded before in making Piazza confirm the woman's tittle-tattle; the means being this time illegal torture, the other time an illegal promise of impunity. The weapons, in both cases, were taken from the armoury of jurisprudence; but were wielded by despots and deceivers.

Seeing that pain had produced its desired effect, they did not heed their victim's plea that at least he be spared further suffering. 'Speak,' they commanded.

He said: 'There was human excrement and *smojazzo*' (i.e. lye; so here is the result of their discovery of the cooking-pot on visiting Mora's house; that visit begun with such parade of authority and then cut short so cunningly) 'because that Commissioner asked me for it so as to smear on the houses; and also some of the stuff that comes from the mouths of the dead people on the carts.' And not even this last detail was Mora's own invention; for when, on a later occasion, they asked him, 'Where did you learn how to compose your unguent?' his reply was: 'People say that the Turks[11] use the stuff that comes from dead men's mouths, and then I thought I would add lye and excrement.' He might have answered: 'I have learned a good deal from my murderers—from you and the public.'

But there is something very strange about this confession; for it was not required by the terms of their questions; indeed they had expressly excluded it from the scope of this interrogation by the words quoted above: 'Do not bother us with that point; it is

[10] From Plutarch's 'Life' of Alexander.

[11] A free translation; the text runs, 'dicevano così in barbaria, che si adoperava di quella materia . . .'. [Tr.]

not about that that we are asking you.' If the pain compelled Mora to lie, one might at least have expected that his lie would correspond to their questions. He could have told them that he was a close friend of Piazza; he could have invented some evil motive, one that aggravated his guilt, for having torn up the paper. But why go beyond the limit to which they were pressing him? Was it, perhaps, that during his agony they had suggested other ways by which he might make the agony cease? Did they ask him other questions of which we have no record? If so, then perhaps I myself was deceived when I said, with regard to Piazza, that the judges had deceived the Governor when they induced him to believe that Piazza had been interrogated about the crime. But this suspicion—that perhaps the lie, after all, *was* told in the actual trial, and not in that letter to the Governor—I left unexpressed, as being insufficiently supported by the facts; whereas here, in this matter of Mora's interrogation, it is precisely the strangeness of the fact itself which almost compels one to suspect a further villainy to add to the many already so evident. We find ourselves, I mean, placed between two alternatives: either to believe that Mora, without being asked, accused himself of a horrible crime, which he had not committed, and which would certainly bring him to a terrible death; or to hazard the suggestion that the judges, while admitting *de facto* that they lacked sufficient grounds for compelling Mora by torture to confess the crime, took advantage of the torture which, on a different pretext, they were inflicting to extort just that confession. I leave the reader to choose the alternative that seems more probable.

The interrogation that followed the torture, like Piazza's after the promise of impunity, was a blend, or, better, an inconsistent muddle of stupidity and guile—a barrage of uncalled for questions together with an avoidance of matters the examination of which both common sense and jurisprudence plainly and imperatively required.

Consider the requirements of jurisprudence. Presupposing that 'no one commits a crime without some motive', and taking note of the fact that 'many persons of weak character have

confessed to having committed crimes which later, after sentence has been passed on them and they are about to be executed, they have protested that they did not commit; and of which, afterwards, and too late, they have been found in fact innocent', the jurists had formulated this rule: that 'no confession is valid unless it contain a statement of the motive that led to the crime, and unless this motive be weighty and plausible in proportion to the crime in question'.[12] Now what had the miserable Mora said? Reduced to the necessity, in that interrogation, of inventing fresh stories to give support to the one which would certainly bring him to a frightful death, he said that the Commissioner had supplied him with saliva from those who had died of the plague and had suggested a criminal use of it; and that Piazza's motive in suggesting this, and his own for accepting the suggestion, was that the two of them would make a large profit as a result of the widespread illness that would ensue; Piazza in his capacity as Commissioner, Mora through the sale of his preservative. I need hardly put it to the reader whether the importance to the two men of such earnings (for which in any case Nature was already providing plentiful occasions) was proportionate to the enormity and the dangers of such a crime. But lest the reader suppose that it might have seemed so to those seventeenth-century judges, and that the motive might have seemed to them quite sufficient, let me assure him that he will soon hear the contrary from their own lips.

And there is yet another difficulty in the way of believing the motive stated by Mora; a difficulty perhaps no stronger, but more concrete and material. The reader may remember that when the Commissioner accused himself, he too stated the motive which had led him into crime, namely that the barber had said to him: 'Smear the walls . . . and then come to me and you'll get a handful', or, as he said at the next examination, 'a great deal of money'. So there were two motives for the same crime; and two, not only different, but opposed and incompatible motives. The same man, according to one confession, bribes his accomplice with a large sum of money; and, according

[12] Farinacci, op. cit., Q. l, 31; lxxxi, 40; lii, 150, 152.

to the other, agrees to join in the latter's crime in the hope of a paltry profit. Let us put from our minds all we have seen hitherto—how these two motives came to be stated, how the two confessions were obtained—and consider the matter simply as it stands in the situation to which our narrative has brought the persons concerned. How then, in such a situation, would we expect judges to behave whose consciences were not perverted, darkened, and stupefied by passion? Such judges would be horrified at having (even through no fault of their own) gone so far; they would have drawn comfort from the thought that at least they had not yet taken the final, irrevocable step; would have halted at the obstacle that fortunately barred their path to the precipice; have given it all their attention, fully resolved to unravel its mystery; have exercised all possible diligence, perseverance, and subtlety in interrogating further; have looked up precedents; have not allowed the case to advance an inch until they had discovered (and would this have been so difficult?) which of the two men was lying or whether both were lying. But our judges, on receiving from Mora this reply, 'Because he would have made a good profit from the illness of so many people, and I would have made a good profit with my preservative', turned to other matters.

After this it will be enough, to say the least, to touch only in passing and partly on the rest of that interrogation. Asked 'whether there were any other accomplices in this affair', Mora replied, 'There may have been Piazza's companions, but I don't know who these are.' They objected: 'This ignorance is not plausible.' At the sound of this word, this fearful herald of torture, the unhappy man at once affirmed in the most positive way, 'They are the *foresari* and Baruello'; whose names he had heard at the previous interrogation. As for the poison, he said that he kept it in the oven, that is just where they imagined it might be. He told them how he concocted it, and ended by saying: 'I threw away what was left of it in the Vedra.' Here I cannot refrain from transcribing Verri's marginal note: 'He wouldn't, of course, have thrown this away after the imprisonment of Piazza!'

He answered various other questions they put to him on times and places and so forth, as though now the substance of the matter were quite clear and proved and only certain details were still lacking. Finally, he was tortured again in order to make his testimony valid against those named therein, in particular against the Commissioner—the man they had already tortured to give validity to a testimony which, on essential points, contradicted Mora's! No use citing legal texts or opinions here; for truly no such case was envisaged in jurisprudence.

A confession made under torture remained invalid unless it was ratified without the use of torture and in some other place, where the hideous instruments could not be seen, and on another day. This was an expedient devised by legal science to render an enforced confession, if possible, spontaneous; and to satisfy at once the promptings of common sense, which said only too clearly that words extorted by pain do not merit credence, and the Roman law which upheld torture. Indeed the jurists argued the desirability of such precautions from the Roman law itself, referring to the following strange words: 'Torture is a delicate, dangerous, and deceptive thing: for many persons have such strength of soul or body that they heed pain very little, so that it is not a means of getting the truth from them; while others are so susceptible to pain that they will tell any lie rather than suffer it.'[13] I call these strange words in a law that upheld torture; and to understand how it was that the only conclusion drawn from them in fact was that 'one cannot always believe what is said under torture', one needs to remember that originally the Roman law was a law made for slaves, and that slaves, in the degraded and corrupt pre-Christian world, could be regarded not as persons but as things; as objects therefore upon which one might carry out any experiment in order to discover the crimes of others. Later legislators, with other ends in view, made this part of the law apply also to free men; which is one example and a notable one, if by no means unique, of how laws may acquire a wider application than they had at first and, so extended, outlast their origins.

[13] *Digest*, XLVIII, tit. 18, ll. 1, 23.

The next day then, in observance of this formality, the judges summoned Mora again. But being now incapable of proceeding without guile, without seeking some advantage, without insinuations, instead of simply asking him whether he meant to ratify his confession, they asked: 'Have you anything to add to what you confessed yesterday after the torture?' Thus they precluded all doubt: jurisprudence required that the confession made under torture should now be open to further question; but they took its truth for granted, only asking that it be added to.

But in the meantime, whether prompted by the sense of his own innocence, or by horror of the death penalty, or by the thought of his wife and children, Mora seems to have regained some hope of bearing fresh tortures more bravely; for his reply was: 'No, my Lord, I have nothing to add; rather, something to subtract.' So they had to ask him what this was. Then he spoke out more frankly, as it were plucking up courage: 'That unguent I talked about, I didn't make it at all; I only said I did because of the torture.' Immediately they threatened him with a repetition of the torture; and this (apart from other flagrant irregularities) without taking account of Mora's contradiction of Piazza, that is without being themselves prepared to say whether the new torture would be on account of Mora's confession or of the Commissioner's deposition; whether inflicted as on an accomplice or as on the chief criminal; for a crime committed at another's instigation or for one which the sufferer himself had instigated; for a crime for which Mora had been willing to pay lavishly, or for one which he had hoped would yield him a pittance.

To this threat he replied as before: 'I repeat; what I said yesterday is completely untrue; I said it because of the torture'; and then: 'Your Lordships, let me say a *Hail Mary,* and then I will do what God shows me I ought to do'; and he knelt down before an image of the Crucified who would one day judge his judges. After a little he got up and, on their urging him to ratify his confession, said, 'In conscience, it isn't true.' They had the unhappy man taken at once to the torture-chamber and bound,

ordering the extra cruelty of the rope.[14] He then said: 'Your Lordships need not torture me again. My confession was true and I confirm it.' Unbound and taken back to the other room, he once more said, 'It is utterly untrue.' So back to the torture-room where again he said what they wanted; and now, the pain having burnt away what little courage was left in him, he upheld what he had said under torture, declaring himself ready to ratify his confession; he did not even want them to read it to him. But to this they would not consent—scrupulously respecting a formality which now meant nothing, while violating greater laws. So they read out the report of the interrogation, and he said, 'It is all true.'

After this, persisting in their method of taking no step in the inquiry, of facing no difficulty, except after using torture (a procedure expressly forbidden in the law itself and one that even Diocletian and Maximian had tried to suppress) they at last thought of asking him whether he had had any purpose other than profit in selling his preservative. 'As far as I know,' he replied, 'I have no other purpose.'

'As far as I know'! Who else, if not he, could know his own private thoughts? And yet these strange words were fitting in the circumstances; no others that the wretched man might have used could have better expressed his self-abdication, so to call it, at that moment; his being ready to say yes and then no, and have only such knowledge, and all such knowledge, as suited the pleasure of those who had power to make him suffer.

They continued to press him, saying: 'It is not very plausible that you and the Commissioner should have planned, by smearing the gates, to spread death and destruction in the city, simply in order that he should find work and you should sell your preservative; therefore, tell us why and wherefore you two started on this course of action for so trivial a motive.'

Ah, so now it seems implausible! So they had threatened and repeatedly tortured him to make him ratify an implausibility! What I said above can be repeated here: 'a remark much to the

[14] See p. 139.

point, but made too late'; the circumstances are so similar, they call for the same comment. Just as it had not occurred to these men that there was anything implausible in Piazza's deposition until, as a result of it, they had Mora in prison; so now they see nothing implausible in the latter's confession until after forcing him to ratify it and so obtaining the instrument they needed for his condemnation. Are we really to believe that this was the first time they noticed the implausibility? If so, how are we to explain, how shall we find words to describe, their subsequent upholding of the validity of the confession? Did Mora perhaps give them a more satisfying answer than Piazza had given? Here is Mora's answer: 'If the Commissioner doesn't know, I don't know; but he must know, and your Lordships will get the truth from him, because he started it all.' And clearly, the motive of all this passing on the principal guilt from each to the other and back again was not so much that each wanted to appear less guilty, as that they both wanted to be rid of the task of explaining things which could not be explained.

After that answer of Mora's they gave him to understand that 'having concocted the aforesaid unguent, in agreement with the said Commissioner, and having then given it to the latter to be smeared on the walls of houses (in the mode and manner stated by both in their depositions) in order to make people die (this purpose having been confessed by the said Commissioner), he had incurred the guilt of actively intending the death of people and thus had become liable to the penalties imposed by the law on whomsoever so intends and endeavours'.

To recapitulate. The judges ask Mora: How is it that you—the two of you together—decided to commit this particular crime for this particular motive? Mora answers: The Commissioner certainly knows why we decided; why he did and why I did: ask him. He refers them to another man for an explanation of an interior event in his own mind; that they might understand how a motive was sufficient to bring him, inwardly, to a decision. And to what other man? To a man who did not admit this particular motive, since he attributed the crime to a wholly different cause. And the judges conclude that the diffi-

culty is solved; that the crime confessed by Mora has become plausible; so much so that they find him guilty of it.

Whatever brought them to see implausibility in such a motive, it was not ignorance; and whatever led them to treat in this way the rules and prescriptions of jurisprudence, it was not jurisprudence.

CHAPTER FIVE

IMPUNITY and torture had brought to light two stories; and while, for such judges as those, this sufficed to justify two sentences of guilt, nevertheless, as we shall now see, they did all they could to blend the two stories into one; and, all things considered, not without success. Finally, and in conclusion, we shall see them by their actions professing themselves convinced of the truth of this eventual single story.

The Senate confirmed and amplified the decision of its delegates. 'Having taken note of what has come to light from the confession of Giangiacomo Mora; having considered and compared the antecedent facts and all the circumstances [except that for one and the same crime there were two principal agents; two different causes; two different arrangements of the facts], the Senate ordered that the said Mora . . . be once more diligently examined, but without torture, to make him explain more clearly the things he has confessed, and to obtain from him the names of the other agents, instruments, and accomplices of the crime; and, this examination terminated, that he be pronounced guilty (after all the facts of the case are recounted) of having concocted the poisonous unguent and given it to Guglielmo Piazza; and that he be allowed three days to prepare his defence. And with regard to Piazza, let him be asked whether he has anything to add to his confession, this having been found incomplete; and in the event of his having nothing to add, let him be pronounced guilty of having spread abroad the said unguent; and be granted the same time for his defence.' That

is to say: Do your best to get all you can out of both men, and in any case let them both be declared guilty, each on his own confession, in spite of the confessions being contradictory.

They began with Piazza, and on the same day. He had nothing to add and did not know that *they* had something; he had not, perhaps, foreseen that in accusing an innocent he was creating an accuser. They asked him why in his deposition he had not said that he had given the barber saliva from persons dead of the plague with which to make the unguent. 'I didn't give him anything,' was his answer; as though those who had believed his lies had to believe him when telling the truth. After more twists and turns of question and answer they declared that 'since you have not told the whole truth, as you promised to do, you cannot and should not any longer enjoy the impunity we promised you'. At once he said: 'My Lord, it is true that the barber came and asked me to get him some of that stuff, and I did bring him some, for making the unguent.' He hoped to save his impunity by admitting everything. Then, either to curry yet more favour or simply to gain time, he added that the money promised him by the barber was to have come from 'a great person', and that he learned this from the barber himself, but had never been able to make the latter say who the person was. He had not had time to think of a name.

So they asked Mora the next day; and probably the poor fellow would have thought up some name or other, as best he could, if they had tortured him. But, as we have seen, the Senate had ruled out torture this time—evidently to make the new ratification they desired of his previous confession seem less blatantly enforced. Hence, when asked 'whether you took the first step in approaching the Commissioner . . . and promised him a lot of money', Mora answered, 'No, my Lord; and where does your Lordship think I could have found this lot of money?' They might in fact have remembered that when Mora's house was thoroughly searched on the day of his arrest the entire treasure found in it had been 'a *baslotto* (jar) containing five *parpagliole* (twelve and a half *soldi*)'. Asked about the 'great person', he replied, 'Your Lordship wants the simple truth,

and this I gave you when I was tortured, and in fact a bit more.'

Neither of the two abstracts of the trial mention that Mora ratified his previous confession; but if, as seems likely, they made him in fact do so, then these words of his amounted to a protest, the force of which he himself did not perhaps realize but which they must have realized. In any case it had always been the common teaching of the jurists, from Bartolo and even before him, from the authors of the Gloss, down to Farinacci, it had become a sort of axiom of jurisprudence, that 'a confession made under torture inflicted on grounds of legally insufficient evidence is null and void and remains so even if later ratified a thousand times without the use of torture': *etiam quod millies sponte sit ratificata.*[1]

After that, Mora and Piazza received the 'publication', as it was called, of the case (that is to say, its acts were communicated to them) and they were allowed two days in which to prepare their defence—why one less than the Senate had decreed is not clear. Each man was assigned an official advocate; but the one assigned to Mora declined the task. Verri suggests that this refusal was due to a cause which unfortunately would not have been unlikely in the circumstances: 'Popular fury,' he says, 'had reached such a pitch that to defend the unhappy victim was regarded as wicked and dishonourable.' However, the true cause is stated in the printed abstract which Verri could not have seen; but it is hardly less strange and, from one point of view, still more deplorable. It was on the same day, 2 July, that the lawyer Mauri was called upon to undertake Mora's defence; but he said, 'I cannot accept this responsibility, first because I am a criminal lawyer and so do not undertake defences, and also because I am neither a procurator nor a barrister: I am quite willing to go and speak with him, as a favour, but I will not undertake his defence.' So to a man who now stood in the shadow of death (and what a death! what manner of death!), a man without connexions or education, and who could turn nowhere for help except to them, who had to

[1] Farinacci, op. cit., Q. xxxvii 110.

depend on them entirely, to this man they gave a defender who lacked certain essential qualifications for the task and had some that were incompatible with it! Even supposing no malice was involved, what irresponsibility! And it was left to a subordinate to recall them to respect for the most obvious and most binding rules of procedure.

Mauri returned and said: 'I have been with Mora and he told me frankly that he had done no wrong and that he said what he did because of the tortures; and when I told him frankly that I neither wished nor was able to undertake his defence, he said that he hoped that at least the Lord President would deign to provide him with an advocate and not permit that he should die undefended.' For such favours, with such words, innocence begged from injustice! They gave him in fact another advocate.

The one assigned to Piazza 'entered and asked to be shown his client's case; they gave it him and he read it'. Was this as far as they would go to oblige the defence? Not always; for Padilla's counsel (Padilla, as we shall presently see, was to represent in flesh and blood that vaguely indicated 'great person') had the records of the whole case at his disposal; thus being able to make that copy of a substantial part of it which has survived for our information.

When the period fixed had elapsed the two poor wretches begged for more time. The Senate granted them 'the whole of the day following and no more', *et non ultra*. Padilla's defence was given three hearings: the first part, on 24 July 1631, was heard 'without prejudice to the rest being heard later'; the next was on 13 April 1632; the last on 10 May of the same year, which was about two years after Padilla's arrest. For an innocent man the slowness of this procedure must have been painful, but compared with the haste used with Piazza and Mora—no lingering for them except in the manner of their death—it represented an outrageous partiality.

However, this new product of Piazza's imagination held up the execution of the death-sentence for some days—days full of deceptive hopes but also of fresh tortures and fresh calumnies.

The Auditor of the Sanità was commissioned to hear a new deposition from Piazza, but secretly and with no notary present; and this time it was Piazza, through his counsel, who asked to be heard, giving out that he had something further to reveal about the 'great person'. Very likely he thought that if he could succeed in drawing some really big fish into this net, which was so easy to enter and so hard to get out of, the big fish, in its struggle to escape, would tear such a rent in the net that the little fish too could then slip through the hole along with it. And since among the many and various conjectures that were circulating in the city as to those responsible for that disastrous fouling of the walls on 18 May (for the angry excitement, the terrors and accusations caused by this incident were to a large extent themselves the cause of the violence employed by the judiciary, so that those who really did foul the walls were guilty of infinitely more evil than they knew) it was being rumoured that Spanish officers had done it, our miserable story-teller found something to hand that he could clutch at. Probably what caused Piazza to name Padilla in particular was (unless indeed the latter was the only Spanish officer he knew even by name) the fact that Padilla was the son of the governor of the Castle and so had a natural protector who, if he came to his son's assistance, could upset the whole trial. After the interview with the Auditor Piazza was summoned before the judges to ratify his new deposition. In his other deposition he had said that the barber refused to name the 'great person'. But now he maintained the contrary; and in order somehow or other to soften the contradiction, he said that Mora had not given him the name immediately: 'In the end, after four or five days, he said that this great man was someone or other Di Padiglia. I don't remember the Christian name although he told me it. I do know and I remember quite clearly that he said that the man was son of the Lord Governor of the Castle of Milan.' He did not, however, say that he had received money from the barber —protesting indeed that he did not even know whether the latter had had any from Padilla.

Piazza was made to sign this deposition, and then immediately

the Auditor was sent off with it to the Governor. This the records tell us; and we can safely presume that the Auditor was told to ask the Governor whether, if need be, he would allow Padilla—who was a cavalry captain and at this time serving with the army near Monferrato—to be handed over to the civil authorities. The Auditor came back; Piazza was at once made to ratify his confession afresh; then off went the Auditor again, this time to the unhappy Mora, who, being pressed to say that he had promised Piazza money and told him that he (Mora) had the backing of a 'great person', whose name he had finally revealed to the Commissioner, replied: 'Before God it's all false; and if I could, I would tell him so, as my conscience bears me witness.' So a new confrontation of the two men was arranged, in which Piazza was asked if it was true that Mora had promised him money, 'declaring that he was acting entirely under the orders and direction of Padiglia, son of the Lord Governor of the Castle of Milan'. On this Padilla's counsel very rightly observes that in this way, 'under the pretext of a confrontation', they were letting Mora know 'what they wanted him to say'. Without, in fact, this or some similar device they could certainly never have got Mora to name Padilla. Torture could make him a liar all right, but not a magician.

Piazza maintained what he had said in his deposition. 'You dare to say this?' cried Mora. 'Yes, I do dare to say it, it is true,' answered the other, shamelessly; 'and it's because of you that I've got into this hole, and you know very well what you said to me at the door of your shop.' Mora, who had perhaps hoped that, with the help of his defending counsel, his innocence would be made clear to all, and who now foresaw new tortures to extort a new confession from him, had not even the strength once again to oppose lies with the truth. He only said: '*Pazienza!* It is for you that I shall die.'

And in fact, once Piazza was taken away (which was done immediately) they warned Mora that 'now at last he must tell the truth'; and as soon as he replied, 'My Lord, I have told the truth,' they threatened torture; 'to be inflicted without prejudice to whatever is already proved and confessed'. It was the usual

formula; but their using it at this point shows the degree to which their intense desire to find a culprit had deprived them of the capacity to reflect. How on earth could Mora's confession that he had led Piazza into crime with the promise of money from Padilla *not* prejudice his confession that he had let himself be led into it by Piazza in the hope of making a profit from his preservative?

Put to the torture, he at once confirmed everything that the Commissioner had said; and, this not satisfying the judges, added that Padilla had in fact suggested that he make 'an unguent to smear on the doors and bolts', and promised him all the money he might ask for and given him all the money he wanted.

We for our part, of course, who have no fear of unguents or fury against their users, nor around us the fury of others demanding satisfaction, we can easily and clearly see how such a confession took place and what caused it. But if we needed light on the matter, we should have it from the lips of him who confessed. Among the many statements of witnesses which Padilla's counsel managed to collect there is one by a Captain Sebastiano Gorini, who happened at that time (we do not know why) to be imprisoned in the same building as Mora and who often spoke with one of the servants of the Auditor of the Sanità, who had been made the unhappy man's jailer. His testimony was as follows: 'This servant said to me one day, just after the barber had been brought back from an interrogation: "Sir, you don't know what the barber has said to me just now; he said that when they examined him he brought out the name of Don Giovanni, son of the Lord Governor of the Castle!" And I was amazed to hear this and said, "Is it true?" And the servant replied that it was true, but that it was also true that the barber protested that he could not remember whether he had ever even spoken to a Spaniard, and that if they had shown him this Don Giovanni he wouldn't even have recognized him. And the servant went on to say, "So I said to him, why then did you give his name?" And the barber replied that he had given it because he heard it from his examiners, and

that he answered them according to whatever he heard them say or what they put into his mouth.' This, thank God, is good evidence in favour of Padilla. But are we to believe that the judges who had put Mora, or allowed him to be put, in charge of a servant of that extremely alert and inquisitive Auditor, that they only came to know what Mora had said (in words that ring so true, so desperately sincere, compared with the absurdities which pain had wrung from him only a moment before) so much later and from the accidental testimony of a witness at Padilla's trial?

And because it seemed strange even to the judges—among so much else that was strange—that a Milanese barber and a Spanish cavalier should have had such dealings with one another, they asked him who had served as the link between them; and Mora at first only said, 'one of his men', with such and such an appearance and dress: but then, they insisting on giving a name, he said, 'Don Pietro di Saragoza'. And certainly this person, at any rate, was imaginary. Later—after Mora's execution of course—a thorough and persistent inquiry was undertaken: soldiers and officers were interrogated, including even Don Francesco de Vargas, the successor to Padilla's father as Governor of the Castle of Milan. No one had ever heard of that Don Pietro. But in the end a man was found in the city prison, awaiting trial for theft, whose name was Pietro Verdeno and who had been born in Saragossa. Being questioned, he said that he had been in Naples at the time: tortured, he said the same thing. People then dropped the subject of Don Pietro of Saragossa.

Harried by more and more questions, Mora went on to say that he had then put his proposal to the Commissioner; who in his turn had received money for the same purpose 'from someone—I don't know his name'. Of course he didn't know it; but the judges wanted to know: so the poor wretch was tortured again and this time unfortunately brought out the name of a real person, a banker called Giulio Sanguinetti: 'the first name to occur to one inventing in agony'.[2]

[2] Livy, *History of Rome*, XXIV, 5.

Piazza, who had hitherto steadily denied having received any money now, being questioned again, at once said that he had received some (the reader may have a better memory than the judges had, and so be able to recall that when the police visited Piazza's house they found even less money than in Mora's, that is none at all). He had received it, he said, from a banker; and since the judges had not given him Sanguinetti's name, he gave them another: Girolamo Turcone. And Turcone and Sanguinetti and various subordinates of theirs were duly arrested, questioned, and tortured; but as they stoutly persisted in denying the charge they were finally let go.

On 21 July the supplementary acts of the trial, as from its resumption, were communicated to Piazza and Mora, and they were allowed another two days to prepare their defence. This time both chose their own advocates, probably on the advice of those originally assigned to them *ex officio*. On the 23rd Padilla was arrested; that is, as we know from the defence at his trial, Padilla was informed by the Commissioner to the cavalry that Spinola had given orders that he should go to the castle of Pomate and give himself up; which he did. His father, as we know from the same source, petitioned, through his lieutenant and his secretary, that the execution of the sentence on Piazza and Mora be suspended until they had been confronted with Don Juan. The answer sent back to him was: 'No suspension is possible because of the excited state of the public' (so for once they mention it, the *civium ardor prava jubentium*:[3] and it was only now that they could do so without confessing a vile and vicious compliancy; now that the only question was, not what their judgement would be, but when it would be carried out. But had the public only now begun to show excitement? Or had the judges only now begun to heed its clamour?) . . . 'but in any case the Lord Don Francisco need not trouble himself, for nothing said by such disreputable persons as those two could possibly cast a slur on the reputation of Don Juan.' Yet what the disreputable persons had said against each other had counted! And how often had the judges called it 'the

[3] Horace, *Odes*, III, 3.

truth'! And when they passed sentence they decreed that after the publication of the sentence both men should be tortured again to bring to light their accomplices! And what the pair then confessed led to further tortures, and so to more confessions and so to more executions—and, as though this were not enough, to executions where there had been no confession.

'And so,' said the above-mentioned secretary, concluding his deposition, 'we returned to the Lord Governor of the Castle and reported all that had happened: and he said no more, but was depressed and humiliated; so much so that after a few days he died.'

By the terms of the hellish sentence passed on them, Piazza and Mora were to be taken in a cart to the place of execution, being torn with red-hot pincers on the way; their right hands cut off in front of Mora's shop; their bones broken on the wheel; and, while they were still alive, their bodies twisted into the wheel and lifted from the ground; and after six hours, their throats to be cut, their corpses burned and the ashes thrown into the river. Mora's house was to be demolished and in the space where it had stood a column erected, to be called the 'Column of Infamy'; it being forbidden ever to build on that spot again. And if anything could add to the horror and indignation and pity that such a sentence arouses in us, it would be to hear the two victims, after being informed of it, renewing and even amplifying their confessions; still driven by the same forces which had extorted these: the hope, still not extinguished, of escaping death, and such a death; the violence of the tortures already suffered, which that frightful sentence no doubt made appear, by comparison, almost lenient, but also as things still present and avoidable; these motives made them not only repeat their former lies but extend them by accusing yet more people. Thus did the judges succeed, with their promise of impunity and their torture, not only in bringing innocent men to a horrible death, but also, so far as the event depended on them, in making those innocent men die guilty.

It is a relief to learn, however, from the records of the defence

in Padilla's trial, that Piazza and Mora, once they were perfectly sure that they were to die and would have to answer no more questions, protested their own innocence and that of the persons accused by them. We know this through that Captain Gorini mentioned above. He deposed that, happening to find himself close to the chapel in which Piazza had been put, he heard the latter 'crying out and saying that his death was a crime, and that he was being murdered, and that they had broken their word to him'; and that he refused the ministrations of the two Capuchin friars who had come to help him to die as a Christian. 'And this,' added Gorini, 'is how I came into it—that I saw that he still had some hope that they would have to withdraw the case against him . . . and so I went to the Commissioner, thinking it would be an act of charity if I could persuade him to get ready to die well, in the grace of God; as in fact I can say that I did. Because the Fathers had not touched the point that really mattered, but I did so; which was when I assured him that I had never known or ever heard of an instance of the Senate's withdrawing a case after sentence of condemnation had been passed. . . . So at last I was able to calm him . . . and after he had calmed down, he sighed for a while and then said that he had unjustly given the names of many innocent persons.' And in fact both Piazza and Mora caused a formal retractation to be written down, by the frairs attending on them, of all the accusations which pain or hope had extorted from them. And both of them endured that long death-agony, that series and variety of agonies with a courage which—in men whom pain and the fear of death had so often overcome; in men who were dying as victims, not of some great cause, but of petty accidents and foolish errors and cheap and base deceits; in men who, even when branded with ill fame, remained lowly humble folk who had nothing to oppose to the execration of the public except the consciousness of an ordinary unheroic innocence, which no one believed in and which they themselves had repeatedly denied; in men (it hurts to think of this, but how can one put away the thought?) who had families, wives, and children—would be incomprehensible if one did not know that it sprang from

resignation; from that gift, I mean, which makes one able to see in the injustice of men the justice of God, and in all punishments, whatever they may be, a pledge, not of pardon merely, but of reward. Both men continued ceaselessly, to the end, and on the wheel itself, to say that they accepted death as a punishment for their sins—their real sins. To accept what cannot be refused! Meaningless words, perhaps, for one who considers things only in their material effects; but of a deep and clear meaning for one who considers, or without considering understands, that that which may be the most difficult part of any deliberation, and is always the most important, the mind's judgement and the movement of the will, is equally difficult and equally important whether the issue depends upon it or not; whether one is assenting to something done or choosing to do it.

Those protestations of innocence might have struck fear into the consciences of the judges; they could also rouse them to anger. Unfortunately the judges succeeded in getting them in part contradicted, and this in the manner that would have been the most decisive possible had it not been the most illusory; namely, by making many of those persons whom the protestations had so authoritatively exculpated accuse themselves on their own account. Over these further trials, however, as the reader has already been notified, I will pass quickly and selectively, in order to come to that of Padilla—to the trial, that is, which, as it is the principal one in view of the eminence of the person accused, so, by reason of the form it took and of its result, it represents a touchstone by which to judge of all the others.

CHAPTER SIX

THE two scissor-grinders who had had the misfortune to be mentioned by Piazza, and later by Mora, had been in prison since 27 June, but had never been confronted with either of their accusers. Nor were they even judicially examined before

the latters' execution, which was on 1 August. On the 11th of that month the father, Girolamo Migliavacca, was interrogated; and the following day tortured, on the usual pretext of having given contradictory and implausible answers. Under torture Girolamo confessed; that is, he made up a story; and did so, like Piazza, by distorting a real fact (both resembling spiders that stick the ends of their thread on to something solid and then work away in the air). Among Girolamo's things the police had found a phial containing an opiate, given him, indeed composed in his own house, by his friend Baruello; and this, he now declared, 'was an unguent intended to kill people', made of matter extracted from toads and snakes, together with 'certain powders—I don't know what *they* are'. Beside Baruello, he named another fairly well-known person; and, as the chief instigator, Padilla. The judges would have liked to connect this story with that of the two men they had murdered; so they tried to make Girolamo say that he had received 'unguent and money' from Piazza and Mora. Had he simply denied this, they had torture in reserve; but he forestalled them with these remarkable words: 'No my Lord, that is not true; but if you torture me for denying it, I shall have to say it is true, although it isn't.' This checked them: they could not, without too obviously making a farce of justice and humanity, appear to try out a means after being so solemnly assured that its effect was guaranteed in advance.

Migliavacca was condemned to the same death as his accusers. After hearing the sentence he was tortured again, and came out with fresh accusations—of another banker and of some other people. In the prison chapel and on the scaffold he retracted everything.

He was a shady character, as Piazza and Mora had said; and if this had been all they said about him, enough came out in the trial to have acquitted them of slander. But his son Gaspare they did slander, even in this respect. Gaspare was indeed, as the records show, guilty of an offence; but it was one that he himself admitted; and at a time and in a manner such as almost to constitute a proof of the purity and integrity

of his entire life. To the end, under torture and face to face with death, he spoke, not just like a brave man but like a martyr. After they had failed to force him to calumniate either himself or others, they sentenced him (on what pretexts it is impossible to say) as proven guilty; and having told him of the sentence, went on to the usual questions, as to whether he had committed other crimes and as to who had been his associates in that for which he was condemned. To the first question Gaspare replied: 'I have not committed this or any other crime. And I am to die because once in anger I punched a man in the eye.' And to the second: 'I have had no associates, because I have minded my own business; and in any case, if I didn't commit the crime, I couldn't have had associates.' Threatened with torture, he said: 'Your Lordships can do as you please, because I will never say I have done what I didn't do; and I will never damn my own soul; I would far rather suffer three or four hours' pain than go to Hell to suffer eternally.' Put to the torture, he cried out at the first shock: 'Ah God! I've done nothing: you're murdering me.' Then he added: 'These pains will be over quickly, but the next world goes on forever.' The torture was intensified by degrees, up to the maximum degree; at every stage they pressed him the harder to tell the truth; and his reply was always the same: 'I have told it already. I want to save my soul. I will not have a lie on my conscience; I have done nothing.'

At this point one cannot help reflecting that if similar sentiments had inspired Piazza, poor Mora would have remained undisturbed in his shop and his home; and this young man also, more worthy of admiration than compassion, and many other innocent people would never have been troubled by even a thought of the dreadful fate they had escaped. And Piazza himself—who knows? For certainly to have condemned him when he had confessed nothing, simply on the evidence that we have seen, and when, in default of others' confessions, the crime itself would have remained the merest conjecture, to do this the judges would have had to violate even more brazenly and boldly every principle of justice and every rule of law. At all

events, at least they could not have condemned him to the additional horror of making him suffer in company with one the sight of whom must have caused him continually to say to himself: I brought him to this! The root cause, then, of such horrors was the weakness. . . . But no! It was the obstinate rage and perfidy of those who, counting it as a disaster and a defeat to discover no culprits, tempted that weakness with an illegal and deceitful promise.

In an earlier chapter I quoted the official decree by which a promise similar to that made to Mora was made to Baruello; and said in passing that I wished to show how the judges' attitudes differed in the two cases. It is chiefly for this reason that the wretched Baruello's story must now be briefly told. As we have seen, he had been accused--without proof—first by Piazza, of being Mora's associate, and then by Mora, of being Piazza's; and then, by both, of having been paid to spread abroad an unguent made by Mora out of muck and worse (and on this point the two witnesses had at first protested ignorance); and then, by Girolamo Migliavacca, of having himself concocted some out of other stuff worse than muck: and now, put on trial for all these things at once, as though they constituted a single charge, Baruello denied everything and stood up stoutly to the ensuing torture. But while his case was still pending, a priest (another of the witnesses to be cited in Padilla's defence), at the request of a relative of Baruello, spoke on the latter's behalf to a barrister employed by the Senate. In due time this official informed the priest that Baruello had been sentenced to death, with all the attendant butchery, but that, at the same time, 'the Senate was prepared to obtain a promise of impunity for him from His Excellency'. The priest meanwhile must go to Baruello and try to persuade him to make a clean breast of everything, 'because the Senate wants to get to the bottom of this affair, and thinks it can obtain the truth from Baruello'. After condemning him to death! And after the execution of Piazza and Mora!

Baruello, on hearing the dire news and the accompanying proposal, said: 'Then are they going to treat me as they treated

the Commissioner?' But, being assured by the priest that the promise seemed to be sincere, he launched into the following story. So-and-so (now dead) had taken him to see the barber. The latter, lifting a curtain that hung by the wall of the room and concealed a door, then led Baruello into a large chamber where many persons were seated, among whom was Padilla. The priest, who was not obliged to find culprits, thought this all rather strange; and interrupted the tale, warning Baruello that he ought to take care not to lose his soul along with his body; and then took his leave. Baruello accepted the Senate's impunity and revised his story; and, being brought before the judges on 11 September, informed them that a certain fencing-master (unfortunately alive) had told him that there was a good chance of becoming rich if one was prepared to do a service to Padilla; and that the fencing-master had then taken him to the square in front of the Castle, where they found Padilla waiting with some other men. Padilla had at once invited him to join those who worked under his orders, smearing the city walls for the purpose of avenging the insults offered to Don Gonzalez de Cordova on the occasion of his departure from Milan; and then had given Baruello money and a little jar of the deadly unguent.

To say that this story (of which I give only the beginning) was implausible would be an abuse of language; it was all a tissue of absurdities, as the reader can see from the sample offered him. However, even the judges found implausibilities in it; and, what is more, inconsistencies. Hence, after various questions followed by answers involving ever new complications, they said to him: 'You must express yourself more clearly if we are to derive any clear information from your story.' On this Baruello—whether it was that he thought of a trick to get him out of the difficulty, or really suffered a temporary derangement (understandable in the circumstances)—began to tremble and writhe, and shout for help, and roll about on the floor, and try to hide under a table. They had him exorcized and calmed down, and then bade him begin again. So he started another tale, this time bringing in witches and magic circles and incan-

tations and the Devil, whom he said he had taken as his lord and master. Enough for us to note that he had not said these things before; and that *inter alia* he now took back what he had said about a revenge for an offence given to Don Gonzalez, asserting instead that Padilla's aim was to make himself master of Milan; and that Padilla had promised him, Baruello, a very high place in the new régime. After various questions the interrogation, if such it can be called, was declared closed. It was later followed by three more, in which, on their telling him that this assertion of his was not plausible or that one not credible, Baruello either replied that he had lied the first time or else invented some other explanation. And when at least five times they put it to him that, according to Migliavacca's deposition, he had himself given the unguent to as many people, for them to spread around the city, whereas in his own deposition these persons were not mentioned, his answer every time was that this was not true; and every time the judges changed the subject. The reader who remembers how, in Piazza's case, at the very first implausibility which the judges thought fit to find in his deposition they threatened to withdraw his impunity; and how, on Piazza's first adding a word to that deposition, when Mora made his first allegation against him and he denied it, they did in fact withdraw it; and the reader who remembers all this will at any rate now see clearly—if the point escaped him before—what an advantage it was to the judges to have played that trick on the Governor of taking it on themselves to concede the impunity without obtaining his authorization: they could make a purely verbal, and void, promise to Piazza. For he had to be the first victim sacrificed to the public's fury and their own.

Do I mean then that it would have been just to maintain that promise of impunity? God forbid! That would be as good as saying that Piazza's testimony was true. I mean only that just as the promise of impunity had been an illegality, so its withdrawal was a brutal intimidation; and that the illegality led straight to the brutality. But then, as I have said before, the judges were not capable of justice so long as they kept to the

path they had chosen; their only chance would have been to turn back while there was yet time. They had had no more moral right (quite apart from legal authority) to sell that impunity to Piazza than a robber has to concede life to a man on the road, when his simple duty is to leave the man alone. That impunity was an injustice added to unjust torturing; both the one and the other being expedients which the judges deliberately adopted and applied in preference to the course of action that the law itself, let alone reason or justice or charity, required of them—namely, to ascertain the true facts of the case; have these explained to the two women who had, rightly or wrongly, called attention to them; and to the man they had, rightly or wrongly, accused; and confront the latter with his accusers.

Nothing came of the impunity promised to Baruello, because he died of the plague on 18 September; the day after he had been confronted with the fencing-master, Carlo Vedano, and had repeated, shamelessly, his accusations. But when he felt that his end was near he said to a fellow-prisoner who was nursing him (and who was to be another of Padilla's witnesses): 'Do me the kindness of telling the Lord Magistrate that all those I have accused, I accused unjustly. And it is not true that I had money from the son of the Governor of the Castle. . . . I'm going to die of this sickness, and I beg those whom I have unjustly accused to forgive me. And please tell the Lord Magistrate this; so I may die in peace.' 'And I,' added the witness, 'went and told the Lord Magistrate what Baruello had said to me.'

This retractation was able to help Padilla; but Vedano, who so far had been mentioned only by Baruello, was very fiercely tortured that same day. He had the strength to endure it without confessing anything; and was then left alone (in prison, of course) until the middle of the following January. He alone of all these little people had some acquaintance with Padilla, having fenced with him twice at the Castle—which clearly was why it occurred to Baruello to allot him a part in his story. However, Baruello had not accused Vedano of concocting or spreading or distributing deadly unguents; but only of being go-between between him and Padilla. Hence the judges could

not condemn Vedano as guilty without pre-judging that gentleman's case; which was probably what saved him. He was not questioned again until after the first interrogation of Padilla; and the latter's acquittal involved his own.

On 10 January 1631 Padilla, who had been transferred to the castle of Pizzighettone, was brought thence to Milan and put in the prison of the Chief of Police. His interrogation took place on the same day; and if concrete proof were needed to assure us that even those judges were capable of interrogating without guile or lies or bullying; of not seeing implausibilities where there were none; of being satisfied with a reasonable answer; of allowing, even when poisonous unguents were in question, that an accused man could tell the truth, even when he said 'no'; the proof is to be seen in this interrogation of Padilla and the two that followed it.

Of those who had named Padilla in their depositions, only Mora and Baruello claimed to have spoken with him; and both had dated their conversations, the former vaguely, the latter more precisely. So the judges began by asking Padilla when he had joined his regiment in the field: he told them the day. The place from which he had gone there? Milan. Had he returned to Milan in the meantime? Once only; and only for one day, which Padilla specified with the same precision. It did not agree with either of the periods invented by the unhappy pair. Then they asked him, courteously, using no threats, 'to try to remember' whether he had been in Milan on such-and-such a day or another day; and each time he answered 'no', referring back to his first reply. Then they came to persons and places. Did he know a gunner called Fontana? (This man, who was father-in-law to Vedano, had been named by Baruello as one of those present at his first encounter with Padilla.) Padilla replied that he did. Did he know Vedano? 'Yes' again. Did he know the Via Vedra de' Cittadini and the inn of the Six Thieves (whither Padilla had come, said Mora, accompanied by Don Pedro of Saragossa, to put to him his proposal about spreading poison in the city)? Padilla answered that he knew neither the street nor the inn—not even by name. They asked him about

Don Pedro of Saragossa. Padilla did not know him; indeed he could not have known him. They asked him about two men wearing clothes of a French cut and about another dressed as a priest; persons whom Baruello had said had come with Padilla to the meeting in the square in front of the Castle. Padilla had no idea of whom they were speaking.

At the second interrogation, on the last day of January, they asked him about his relations with Mora, Migliavacca, and Baruello—the meetings, the money given, the promises; but without as yet mentioning the general plan with which these details were connected. Padilla answered that he had never had anything to do with the men in question; they were not even names to him; and repeated that he was out of Milan at the times referred to.

After more than three months spent in inquiries which, naturally, were quite fruitless, the Senate decreed that Padilla be tried for the crime of which he stood accused, be supplied with the facts of the case and an account of the trial, and given a fixed time in which to prepare his defence. This order led to a third, and last, interrogation on 22 May. After various questions touching all the points on which he was accused—questions Padilla invariably answered in the negative and, for the most part, curtly—they came to 'the facts of the case', that is to say, they threw in his face the crazy story, or rather stories, they had collected. And first, that he, the accused, had told Mora, the barber, 'near the inn called the Six Thieves, to make an unguent . . . and take the said unguent and go and smear it on the walls', and that he had paid Mora well for his trouble; and that later Don Pedro of Saragossa, acting under his orders, had sent the barber to such and such bankers to cash still more money on his account. But this tale is rational compared with the other one: namely, that the accused, having summoned Baruello to the square in front of the Castle, had said to him there: 'Good morning, Signor Baruello, I have been wanting to speak with you for a long time now'; and after various other compliments, had given Baruello twenty-five Venetian ducats and a jar of unguent, telling him that this stuff was made in Milan but that

it wasn't quite suitable for its purpose, and that what was needed was to 'take some *ghezzi* and *zatti*' (lizards and toads) and 'some white wine', and put it all in a saucepan and 'boil it *a concio a concio* [very slowly] so that those animals should die in a fury'. Moreover a priest, 'called "the Frenchman" by the said Baruello' and who had come in the accused's company, had caused to appear 'one in the form of a man and dressed like *Pantalone*', and had made Baruello acknowledge the apparition as his lord; and on its vanishing, Baruello had asked the accused who it was and the accused had replied that it was the Devil. And that on another occasion the accused had given Baruello more money, and promised to make him an officer in his body-guard, on condition that he served him well.

At this point Verri (so much may exclusive attachment to one point of view cause the noblest minds to err, even about things they really know) concludes thus: 'Such was the series of charges brought against the son of the Governor of the Castle; charges which, though given the lie by all the other persons interrogated—except that unhappy trio, Mora, Piazza, and Baruello, who abandoned truth entirely under the stress of torture—were taken as evidence of an abominable crime.' But, as the reader knows and as Verri himself had related, what led two of the trio to lie was not the stress of torture but the enticement of impunity.

On hearing that contemptible balderdash Padilla said: 'Of all the persons your Lordship has named I know only Fontana and the *Tegnone* (a nickname for Vedano); and all that your Lordship reports as having been said in the course of the trial by those men is as completely false and untrue as anything possibly could be. It is beyond all belief that a gentleman of my rank should have done, or dreamed of doing, such infamous things. And I pray God and His Holy Mother to send me to Hell here and now if all this be true. And I am confident that God will make it known, and known to the world, that those men were lying.'

The judges replied, as a matter of form and without pressing Padilla, that he must be resolved to speak the truth; and then

informed him of the Senate's decree putting him on trial for the crime of making and distributing a poisonous unguent and of hiring accomplices. 'I am exceedingly astonished,' was his answer, 'that the Senate should have taken so serious a step when it is clear and proved that all this is nothing but a fraud and a lie—an insult not only to myself but to justice. What! A man of my quality, a man who has spent his life in the service of His Majesty and the defence of this State, a descendant of men who did the same—would I do or think of doing a thing that would bring me such disgrace and dishonour? I repeat: all this is a lie; the biggest fraud ever committed against a man.'

It is cheering to hear such language from outraged innocence; but horrifying to recall that, before those same judges, innocence had been terrified, bewildered, driven to despair, to lies, to calumny; and also fearless, resolute, loyal to the truth—and condemned just the same.

Padilla was acquitted: the exact date is uncertain, but it must have been more than a year later, since his defence was concluded in May 1632. And certainly the acquittal was not conceded as a favour; but in that case did it not occur to the judges that, acquitting Padilla, they declared all their previous condemnations unjust? When they admitted that Padilla had not paid a penny for those imaginary smearings, did they remember the men they had condemned for being paid by him for that very purpose? Did they remember saying to Mora that that motive (to earn money from Padilla) was 'more plausible . . . than that you would find opportunities for selling your preservative, and the Commissioner find opportunities for work'? Did they remember that in the interrogation which followed, when Mora persisted in denying that motive, they had said to him, 'nevertheless it is evidently true'? That when, confronted with Piazza, he denied it again, they had tortured him to make him confess it, and then tortured him once more to give validity to the confession so extorted? That from then on to the end the whole trial had proceeded on the supposition that that motive was the true one? That it had been expressed or implied in all their question, and confirmed by every reply,

as the motive at last discovered and acknowledged, the true motive, the single and sufficient motive which led Piazza and Mora, and then the others condemned after them, into crime? Did they remember that the Lord Chancellor, at the Senate's request, had caused a proclamation to be published a few days after the execution of Piazza and Mora, declaring them 'to have fallen into so impious a state of mind as to have betrayed their own Fatherland for money'? And when, eventually, they saw that motive eliminated (for there was never any question thoughout the trial of anyone but Padilla paying anybody) did it occur to them that now there was no reason left for thinking that a crime had been committed at all, except confessions obtained in such ways as they well knew and retracted between the Last Sacraments and death? And that those confessions, already in contradiction with one another, were now in manifest contradiction with the facts? Did they, in short, realize that in acquitting the ring-leader after condemning his accomplices, they showed themselves guilty of condemning the innocent?

Quite the reverse; to judge by what appeared in public, at least. The monument was left standing, the sentence never revoked; and the families of the men it had condemned remained under the imputation of 'infamy'; and the children thus so cruelly orphaned remained legally destitute. And as for the judges' secret thoughts on the matter, who can measure the resistance to fresh evidence of which men are capable, when their error is wilful and is already toughened in the fight against evidence? Indeed, their error must have now become more dear to the judges, more precious than ever; for if previously to admit the innocence of the accused would have meant only the loss of an opportunity of finding someone guilty, now it would mean that they found themselves guilty, and dreadfully so; and all those deceits, all that flouting of the law, which they knew they had committed and which they wished to believe were justified by the discovery of criminals so depraved and so dangerous, would now not only be unveiled in their own intrinsic ugliness but would be seen by all as the means employed for committing atrocious murder. And, lastly, the

error was upheld and reinforced by an authority that is always powerful, though often wrong and in this case also curiously illusory, since it was to a large extent based on that of the judges themselves; I mean the authority of the public which was proclaiming those judges as wise, zealous, intrepid defenders and champions of the Fatherland.

The Column of Infamy was pulled down in 1778; and when, in 1803, a house was built again on space that it had occupied, the arch over the road was also demolished from which Caterina Rosa,

L'infernal dea che alla veletta stava,[1]

raised the cry that began all the butchery: so that now there is nothing left to remind one either of the frightful effects or of the miserable cause. Where Via della Vetra joins the road leading to Porta Ticinese, the house at the corner, to the left as you look from that road, stands on ground once occupied by poor Mora's dwelling.

And now, if the reader has patience enough for one final inquiry, let us see how that woman's rash judgement, after proving so powerful in the law-courts, continued, thanks to them, to hold sway in books also.

[1] From A. Caro's transl. of the *Aeneid*, VII, 789: 'the infernal goddess who stood on the look-out'.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Of the many writers contemporary with the affair, let us consider the only one who is not now generally forgotten, and whose comments on it were not a mere echo of popular credulity: Giuseppe Ripamonti.[1] This writer—already so often

[1] Milanese canon and official civic historiographer (1573–1643). Manzoni made full use of his *Historiae patriae* (10 volumes, Milan, 1641) in writing *I promessi sposi*. The reflections that follow concern a smaller work, *De Peste quae fuit anno 1630* (also published in 1641), espec. pp. 107–8. [Tr.]

cited—provides, it seems to me, a curious example of the power which a dominant opinion can retain over the words of those whose minds it has not been able to subdue. Not only does Ripamonti never explicitly deny the guilt of those who suffered in the affair (nor, in fact, did anyone else until Verri, in any work intended for publication) but he more than once seems to want expressly to affirm it. Referring to Piazza's first interrogation, he speaks of his 'evil intentions' and of the judges' 'clearsightedness': he says that Piazza 'by so often contradicting himself, revealed his crime in the act of denying it'. So too when he comes to Mora: 'He denied his guilt as criminals usually do, so long as he could bear the torture; but gave in the end a truthful account of the whole matter (*exposuit omnia cum fide*).' And yet at the same time we find Ripamonti insinuating the contrary view—timidly hinting, in passing, at his own uncertainty as to some of the more important circumstances; dropping phrases here and there that guide the reader's reflections in the right direction; sometimes putting into the mouths of the accused words more calculated to prove their innocence than those they themselves had been able to find; lastly, evincing the sort of compassion that is only aroused by innocence. Alluding to the cooking-pot found in Mora's house, he says: 'This find made a great impression at first, though it may have been, though sordid enough, quite insignificant; but it seemed it could have a bearing on the inquiry.' Speaking of the first confrontation of Piazza and Mora, he says that Mora 'invoked the justice of God against a false and malicious fabrication, against a trap set for unwary innocence'. He calls Mora 'that unhappy father and husband who unwittingly caused his own and his family's ruin'. And all those reflections which, as the reader will remember, I made on the obvious contradiction between the acquittal of Padilla and the condemnation of the others, these and much else that one might say on the subject are all suggested by Ripamonti in a single word: 'The smearers were punished nevertheless, *unctores puniti tamen.*' What a wealth of meaning in that adverb or conjunction! And he goes on: 'The city would have been horrorstruck by the

outrageous cruelty of the execution were it not that anything seemed less dreadful than the crime itself.'

But where Ripamonti's real feelings show most clearly is where he protests that he does not wish to show them. After recounting various cases of people who fell under suspicion of 'smearing' but were not in fact brought to trial, he continues:

> Here I find myself at a difficult and delicate point in my discussion of the affair. Can I say that I myself am persuaded that these were the only persons mistakenly assumed to be smearers? That, in short, I believe that there were really any smearers at all? . . . Nor is my difficulty due to an uncertainty in the matter itself, but to the fact that I am not permitted the freedom to which every writer lays claim, viz. that of expressing what one really thinks. For were I to assert that in truth there were no smearers, that imagination has misconstrued as human malice what was really a punishment sent from God, the cry would at once be raised accusing History of impiety and this historian of a want of respect for a solemn judgement of the courts: so firmly rooted in men's minds is the contrary view. And the populace and the nobility, the one, as usual, credulous and the other proud, are united in eager defence of this view as of something exceedingly precious and sacred. To defy so many adversaries would be a most troublesome undertaking and in any case a futile one. Therefore, without either denying or affirming, or even inclining to one side rather than the other, I will limit myself to presenting the opinion of others.

And should it occur to the reader that, in these circumstances, it might have been more reasonable, as well as easier, to say nothing at all, he should know that Ripamonti was the city's official historiographer; that is to say, a man who could sometimes be ordered to write history and sometimes forbidden.

Another historiographer (though he worked on a wider field), Battista Nani,[2] who, as a Venetian, was under no constraint in this case to say what was false for fear of giving offence, was led to believe it nevertheless on the authority of an inscription and a monument. 'It may well be true,' he wrote, 'that the terrified

[2] Nani's *Storia della Repubblica Veneta* was first printed in Venice, 1662. Manzoni quotes from Part I, Book 8, p. 473 in the ed. (Venice, Lovisa) of 1720. [Tr.]

populace imagined a great deal, but the fact remains that the crime was discovered and duly punished; witness the inscriptions that are still to be seen in Milan and the memorial marking where the houses stood in which these monsters used to congregate.' But the reader not otherwise acquainted with Nani will be greatly deceived if he bases his opinion of Nani's intelligence on this piece of reasoning. On various important embassies abroad and in public office at home Nani had abundant opportunities for observing men and things; and his historical work is there to show that he was no mean observer. But neither the sentences of criminal courts nor the fate of the poor (taken a few at a time) are regarded as a proper subject for history; so it need not surprise us that Nani, when he touched in passing on our affair, did not greatly trouble himself over details. Had anyone referred him to some other Milanese column or inscription as proof of a defeat suffered by Venice (a defeat that would be as true as the crime of 'those monsters'), Nani most certainly would have laughed.

It is more surprising and more distasteful to find the same argument and similar insults in the work of a much more famous —and very deservedly famous—man. Muratori, in his *Trattato del governo della peste*,[3] after referring to various accounts of similar cases, says:

> But none is more celebrated than that which occurred in Milan during the plague of 1630, when many persons were arrested and, confessing their hideous crime, were put to death with the utmost severity. A dreadful memorial of this affair survives in the shape of the 'Column of Infamy', which I myself have seen and which stands where once was the house of those inhuman murderers; an object deserving the greatest attention lest such execrable scenes be ever re-enacted.

And it does nothing to lessen one's distaste, but only alters it, to find that Muratori was not so firmly convinced as these

[3] L. A. Muratori (1672–1750), the greatest Italian scholar of the eighteenth century. The work Manzoni refers to may be found in Vol. 47 of the Venetian edition, 1790; the words quoted being on pp. 157, 159, 160. The reference a few lines on is to *I promessi sposi*, Ch. XXXII. [Tr.]

words make him appear. For later, when he comes to discuss the horrors that can be caused by imagining and believing in such things without regard for evidence (and this, clearly, is what he is really concerned about) he writes: 'It leads to people being thrown into prison and compelled by torture to confess crimes they may never have committed, and then miserably slaughtered on the scaffold.' This looks—doesn't it?—remarkably like an allusion to our poor sufferers. And what gives substance to the suspicion is that Muratori at once continues with words which I quoted in the preceding work and which are few enough to be repeated here. 'In Milan I have met people of good judgement, and who had been well informed on the matter by their elders, who were not much convinced of the truth of that story about the contamination of the city with poisonous unguents which made such a stir during the plague of 1630.' It is, I repeat, impossible not to suspect that in his heart Muratori thought these 'scenes' which he called 'execrable' were really just stupid stories and that—and this is more serious—the men he called 'inhuman murderers' were really innocent and murdered. His case would be one of those, unhappily not infrequent, of men, by no means prone to tell lies, who, desiring to undermine the power of false and pernicious opinions, but fearing to make things worse by a frontal attack, have thought it best to start by lying so as to be able later to insinuate truth.

After Muratori we meet with a writer more famous than he as an historian and one too (which, in a matter of this kind, would make one expect his judgement to be particularly valuable) who was also a lawyer—as he himself said, 'more lawyer than politician'—, Pietro Giannone.[4] I will not, however, quote Giannone's judgement here, having too recently done so. It is Nani's; which the reader saw a little while ago and which Giannone copied word for word, this time giving the reference in a footnote.

I say 'this time' because Giannone's copying from Nani with-

[4] P. Giannone (1676–1748) had a European reputation as a vehement upholder of the independence of the civil power *vis-à-vis* the Church. His *Storia civile del regno di Napoli* was published in 1723. [Tr.]

out acknowledgement is a thing worth noting if, as I believe, it has hitherto passed unnoticed. His account, for example, of the rising in Catalonia and the Portuguese revolution in 1640 is a transcript of Nani's, occupying seven quarto pages, with very few omissions, additions, or alterations, the most substantial of these being that the original text, which runs on continuously, has been broken up into chapters and paragraphs. But what would be incredible if it were not true is that when our Neapolitan lawyer comes to deal, not with the risings in Barcelona or Lisbon, but with that of Palermo in 1647 and with the more famous—because it gave rise to stranger happenings and involved Masaniello—rebellion of Naples in the same year, he can think of no better, of no more detailed way of describing those events than to lift his entire account of them—not just the materials but the complete narrative—from the work of the Knight and Procurator of St. Mark! And this too after the following words introducing this section of his book:

> The unhappy events which these revolutions involved have been described by a number of writers, some trying to present them as quasi-miraculous exceptions to the ordinary course of Nature, while others confuse the reader with too much petty detail, and so fail to bring out clearly the true causes of what happened and its aims and development and conclusion. Therefore I shall make it my business, guided by the weightiest and most discerning authorities, to present an account of the matter reduced to its just proportions.

Yet, as anyone can see who takes the trouble to compare text with text, Giannone had no sooner written these words than he laid hands on Nani's narrative, mixing a little of his own with it now and then, especially near the beginning, altering a little here and there, sometimes because he really had no choice, just as if you buy second-hand linen you must substitute your own markings for the original owner's. Thus where the Venetian has 'in that kingdom', the Neapolitan writes 'in this kingdom'; where the contemporary writer wrote 'the factions remain almost as they were', the later one says 'the residue of those old factions remained'. True, we do find, in this lengthy section,

besides such small additions and alterations, sundry longer pieces in the patchwork that are not from Nani. But, believe it or not, they are almost all lifted, and almost word for word, from someone else—from Domenico Parrino, a writer who (reversing the fate of so many) is now forgotten but still much read, perhaps indeed more than he himself had ever hoped, if people read as much as they praise, both in Italy and abroad, the *Storia civile del regno di Napoli* which bears the name of Pietro Giannone. For—still keeping to the two periods just mentioned—if, having transcribed from Nani a description of the Catalan and Portuguese rebellions, Giannone goes to Nani again for his account of the fall of the favourite Olivares, it is from Parrino that he copies out his account of the consequent recall of the Viceroy of Naples, the Duke of Medina, and the latter's dodges for putting off as long as possible the surrender of his post to his successor Enriquez de Cabrera. From Parrino too is copied out most of Giannone's account of Cabrera's government; after which bits from Parrino and Nani are fitted together like inlaid work when we come to the government of the Duke of Arcos and through the rest of the period preceding the risings in Palermo and Naples; and, as I have said, throughout the progress of these to their conclusion under the government of Don John of Austria and of the Count of Oñatte. Then it is Parrino alone who is used, still in long pieces or a lot of little ones, for this last Viceroy's expedition against Piombino and Portolongone; as also for the Duke of Guise's attempt on Naples; as also for the plague of 1656. Then it is Nani for the Peace of the Pyrenees; and then Parrino, finally, for a short appendix on the effects of this peace on the kingdom of Naples.

Voltaire, in his *Siècle de Louis XIV*,[5] speaking of the tribunals set up by that king at Metz and Brisac in order to adjudicate his claims to the territories of neighbouring States, has a footnote mentioning Giannone with high praise, as was to be expected, but also with a rebuke. Here is the footnote translated: 'Giannone, so celebrated for his valuable history of Naples, says that the tribunals were set up at Tournai. He is often wrong

[5] Ch. 17.

on matters that do not concern his own country. He says, for example, that at Nimeguen Louis XIV made peace with Sweden; which was in fact his ally already.' But, leaving aside the praise, the rebuke was not this time deserved by Giannone, who, as on so many other occasions, had not even gone to the trouble of making a mistake. It is true that in this 'so celebrated' author's work occur these words: 'Peace followed between France, Sweden, the Empire, and the Emperor' (which, after all, may be ambiguous rather than wrong); and also the following:

> They [the French] then set up two tribunals, one at Tournai and the other at Metz; and arrogating to themselves a jurisdiction such as the world had never seen over neighbouring sovereigns, they did not merely make over to France, as 'dependencies', every country to which they took a fancy along the frontiers of Flanders and the Empire, but actually and in fact took possession of those territories, constraining the inhabitants to acknowledge the Most Christian King as their sovereign, drawing the frontiers where they pleased and exercising in fact all those rights of overlordship which Princes are accustomed to claim over their subjects.

But it was poor unknown Parrino who penned these words; and Giannone has not even excised them from the narrative where they occurred but has carried them off context and all; because often Giannone cannot wait to pluck a fruit here and a fruit there, but must dig up the whole tree for transplanting in his own garden. His entire account, one may say, of the Peace of Nimeguen is the work of Parrino; and likewise, in great part, with much left out and a few additions, his account of the viceroyalty in Naples of the Marquis de los Veles, during which that Peace was concluded and with which Parrino ends his narrative and Giannone the penultimate book of his. And probably (I had almost said certainly) anyone who cared to amuse himself by completing these comparisons would find that what has been observed with regard to some decades of the Spanish dominion in Naples held good for the entire preceding period back to the beginning of that régime, which is also the

point at which Parrino begins his narrative; nor, if I am not very much deceived, would he ever find this much-plundered author mentioned by name. From Sarpi too (as a kind and learned friend has pointed out to me) Giannone lifted many passages without acknowledgement and the whole plan and order of one of his digressions. And who knows what other unnoticed thefts would come to light if one cared to look for them; but so much as we have seen—appropriations, not merely of other writers' choice and arrangement of materials, or of their judgements and comments and general spirit, but of entire pages and chapters and books—this, in a famous and highly commended author, is surely something of a phenomenon. Whether due to sterility or to sloth, the result is certainly a rarity, as the audacity was rare that brought it about: but more than rare, but unique, was Giannone's good fortune—that, for all this, he remains (while he does remain) a great man. And let this circumstance, together with the occasion for pointing it out which our theme supplied, be my excuse to the gentle reader for taking him on so long a *détour* in what is, after all, only a supplementary chapter of a small book.

Who does not know Parini's unfinished poem on the Column of Infamy? Yet who would not be surprised to find no mention of it here?

Here then are the few lines of this fragment, in which the celebrated poet echoes only too faithfully what the common people and the inscription said:

> Quando, tra vili case e in mezzo a poche
> rovine, i' vidi ignobil piazza aprirsi.
> Quivi romita una colonna sorge
> in fra l'erbe infeconde e i sassi e il lezzo,
> ov'uom mai non penetra, però ch'indi
> genio propizio all'insubre cittade
> ognun rimove, alto gridando: lungi,
> o buoni cittadin, lungi, che il suolo
> miserabile infame non v'infetti.[6]

[6] '. . . when I saw before me an ignoble square between mean houses and scattered ruins. Here a solitary column stands among sterile grass and stones

Was this opinion really Parini's? We do not know: and his having expressed it so affirmatively—but in verse—is no argument; because at that time it was a rule commonly accepted that poets had the privilege of making use of any belief, true or false, that was likely to produce a powerful or pleasing impression. The privilege! A privilege to uphold falsehood and make it exciting! But then the answer given was that this did not matter because . . . well, poets, nobody believed what *they* said. To which answer there is no answer; except that it may seem odd that poets were satisfied with either the permission or the excuse.

Then at last came Pietro Verri, the first writer after one hundred and forty-seven years who saw and said who had been the real murderers; the first to speak up for the innocent who had been butchered with such barbarity and abhorred so obtusely; to claim for them a compassion the more due for being so long delayed. And yet Verri's *Osservazioni*, written in 1777, were not published until 1804, when they came out with other works of his, some already printed and some not, in a collection of 'Italian Classics of Political Economy'.[7] And in his preface the editor explained the delay. 'It was thought,' he said, 'that the good name of the Senate might suffer from the disrepute that would attach to the Senate of former times.' A very usual kind of sentiment, this, in those days; an effect of that *esprit de corps* which made each member of an institution, rather than ever admit that his predecessors had made mistakes, assume responsibility even for follies not committed by himself. In our day this kind of loyalty to institutions has less chance of extending so far back into the past, because almost everywhere in Europe institutions are of recent origin—with a few exceptions,

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and smells. It is approached by no one, for the guardian Spirit of the Lombard city turns all men from this place, crying: Away, good citizens, away, lest the wretched infamous ground infect you!' These last words render the Latin inscription on the Column: *Procul hinc, procul ergo boni cives, ne vos infelix infame solum commaculet.* Giuseppe Parini (1729–1799), like Manzoni a Milanese, is one of the finest Italian satirical poets. [Tr.]

[7] Milan, 1804: Verri's *Osservazioni sulla tortura* is in Vol. 17, pp. 193–312.

to be sure, and one in particular which, since it does not draw its origin from man, can be neither abolished nor replaced. In addition, such institutional loyalty is, now more than ever before, resisted and undermined by individualism: the 'I' thinks itself too rich to beg from a 'We'. And in this respect individualism is beneficial; God forbid I should say in every respect.

In any case, Pietro Verri was not the man to sacrifice truth-telling to human respect of this kind, when the truth to be told was important both because of the credit enjoyed by the contrary falsehood and still more because of the purpose he had in mind in telling it. But there was a circumstance which rendered human respect, in this case, just: the President of the Senate was the illustrious writer's father. And so it happens quite often; good reasons come to the aid of bad ones, and then the combined effect of both is that a truth which has taken a long while to come to birth has still to remain for a while concealed.